



THE HARLAN ELLISON COLLECTION

SLEEPLESS NIGHTS IN
THE PROCRUSTEAN BED



Sleepless Nights in the Procrustean Bed

Essays by Harlan Ellison



DEDICATION

*For the other meanest,
shortest guy in town—
destroyer lawyer and
friend to the heart of
the flames, the unquenchable*
HENRY W. HOLMES, JR.

NOTE

A dagger (†) is used throughout the text to refer the reader to the editor's notes on Notes.

CONTENTS

Editor's Introduction

You Don't Know Me, I Don't Know You

Stealing Tomorrow

Harlan and Television Down the Rabbit-Hole to TV-Land

**Revealed at Last! What Killed the Dinosaurs! And You Don't
Look So Terrific Yourself**

Epiphany

Rolling Dat Ole Debbil Electronic Stone

A Love Song to Jerry Falwell

The World of SF Science Fiction: Turning Reality Inside-Out

Defeating the Green Slime

**How You Stupidly Blew \$15 Million a Week, Avoided Having
an Adenoid-Shaped Swimming Pool in Your Back Yard, Missed
the Opportunity to Have a Mutually Destructive Love Affair
with Clint Eastwood and/or Raquel Welch, and Otherwise
Pissed Me Off**

Fear Not Your Enemies

Face-Down in Gloria Swanson's Swimming Pool

From Alabamy, with Hate

Profiles Leiber: A Few Too Few Words

Serita Rosenthal Ellison: A Eulogy

Centerpunching

Voe Doe Dee Oh Doe

Robert Silverberg: An Appreciation

Cheap Thrills on the Road to Hell

True Love: Groping for the Holy Grail

Notes

INTRODUCTION BY MARTY CLARK

For the serious Ellison reader, there are few tasks more difficult than staying current with his nonfiction output. Harlan's work appears all over the literary map, so that it is impossible to know where he will turn up next. This is also true of his fiction, but one can always count on the publication of a new fiction collection every few years to gather together those stories which one has missed. Until now, this has not been so of his essays. They have occasionally been included in other collections and, as with the four essays which appear in Harlan's short story collection *Stalking the Nightmare* (Phantasia Press, 1982), have received raves. Also much in demand are *The Glass Teat* and *The Other Glass Teat* (Ace, 1983) which collected the columns of television criticism which Harlan wrote over a period of four years in the Los Angeles *Free Press*. However, *Sleepless Nights in the Procrustean Bed* marks the first time that a book has been devoted exclusively to the best of his general essays. The twenty reprinted here are from such disparate sources as *Video Review*, *Heavy Metal* and the *Saint Louis Literary Supplement*.

Credit for suggesting this collection of Harlan's nonfiction belongs to our publisher, Robert Reginald of Borgo Press, who approached Harlan with the opinion that "These Menckenisms deserve a permanent home; they've been undeservedly neglected by both readers and critics, who tend to focus on your more flamboyant short stories."

At the time this book was proposed I had spent over two years with Harlan in the enviable position of personal secretary, administrative officer of his professional corporation, and occasional grammarian. Modesty compels me to point out that the opportunity entrusted to me in assembling this book derived in large measure from being in the right place at the right time. In addition to that qualification, I brought to the task of editing these essays other qualities, among them familiarity with Harlan and his work, and a great enthusiasm for the idea of making the essays available to a larger audience. I am also probably the only person ever to read straight through the entire body of Harlan's nonfiction work (all twelve file drawers of it), a distinction which I do not expect to relinquish any time soon.

I was initially enthusiastic at the prospect of editing this collection of essays simply because I admired them and felt that they deserved to

be read. It was only after I began research for the book that I came to appreciate how startlingly well-suited to Harlan's talents the essay form is. I suspect that Harlan himself is unaware of the degree to which his gifts match the requirements of the essay. In point of fact, if the form did not exist, Harlan would have had to invent it. Fortunately, this was not necessary.

In the judgment of scholars, the essay was invented by 16th-century French nobleman Michel de Montaigne. His two volumes titled *Essais* (meaning "attempts, experiments, endeavors") were the first to be identified as such, although of course "the word is late, though the thing be ancient." As with all literary forms, the roots of the essay stretch back to antiquity; Harlan is one of the ablest contemporary practitioners in a form favored by such honored writers as Swift and Emerson and Thoreau. Today he shares the form with columnists and commentators as diverse as William F. Buckley, Jr. and Ellen Goodman, Joan Didion and Sidney Harris, Shana Alexander and Tom Wolfe.

The 20th century has seen a broadening of the concept of the essay. Because of the huge circulation of periodicals (magazines such as *Newsweek*, *Esquire*, and the proliferating city magazines which publish essayists; newspapers which carry numerous syndicated columnists), the essay has become a major vehicle for the communication of ideas. Harlan is toiling in a literary form which is currently very popular, and therefore powerful.

As presently evolved, the essay is a short prose form which deals with a single subject. Although historically essays have ranged from the length of aphorisms to the extended essays of de Tocqueville, relative brevity characterizes modern essays. Harlan's range from a length of less than one thousand words to a maximum, in this collection, of 9400 words.

Although each essay addresses only one subject, over the years hundreds of subjects have been the target of Harlan's wandering reflections. He is conversant on nearly every subject one can think of, largely due to the fact that he is one of the most widely-read men alive. Harlan samples *everything*, and the input that can't be had from reading, his peripatetic mind seeks from judicious viewing of thirty channels of cable television, faithful attendance at film screenings, and constant association with colleagues and friends who are similarly well-informed. Topics for his typewriter are limited only by his interests, which is to say, not limited at all. This collection includes essays on topics from gun control ("Fear Not Your Enemies") to video dating ("True Love: Groping for the Holy Grail").

Many of Harlan's strengths as a writer are the salient characteristics of the essay form, in particular *informality of structure*,

highly distinctive style, and a strong personal tone.

The essay is not a rigorous literary form. Its purpose is to stimulate and influence thought, rather than to educate or instruct. It accommodates, but does not require, the scholarly, philosophical approach such as that exercised by Francis Bacon. Consequently, it need not be exhaustive in its treatment of the subject. This suits Harlan quite well. He throws everything he has into the writing of a piece, rather like making a salad. On the other hand, he will ignore avenues of inquiry one might expect him to pursue. It simply does not please him to go down that road right now. (Interestingly, he will often expand on those subjects in later work; I've noted some of these in the text.) Such incompleteness would be a fault in a more didactic work, but is quite permissible within the essay form. By this I do not mean to suggest that Harlan is jarringly unsystematic in the presentation of his material; and in fact some of his shorter essays such as "Epiphany" and "Rolling Dat Ole Debbil Electronic Stone" are deceptively disciplined, tightly-wrapped little pieces. But the scattergun pyrotechnics of his mind are clearly at home in the freedom of the essay, which Samuel Johnson called "a loose sally of the mind...not a regular and orderly performance."

It is Thomas Macaulay, however, who perhaps best expresses a consideration which I hope you will keep in mind as you enjoy this assortment of writings reprinted from a variety of sources. Macaulay himself resisted being reprinted for this reason:

The public judges, or ought to judge, indulgently of periodical works. They are not expected to be highly finished...The writer may blunder, he may contradict himself, he may break off in the middle of a story... All this is readily forgiven if there be a certain spirit and vivacity in his style. But as soon as he is reprinted, he challenges a comparison with all the most symmetrical and polished of human compositions.

As to style, excellence as an essayist leans heavily on a distinctive manner of expression, and there are few contemporary writers with as distinctive a style as Harlan's. Tom Wolfe, perhaps, or William F. Buckley, Jr. are as readily recognized. Harlan's style has always been high-profile; the discerning reader has no difficulty identifying an unattributed piece of his work. One marvels sometimes, re-reading a particularly striking passage, *How did he do that?* As Alexander Smith said of Montaigne and Bacon,

Not only is the thinking different, the manner of setting forth the thinking is different. We despair of reaching the thought, we despair

equally of reaching the language.

Harlan's virtuosity is inarguable, and his command of the material allows him to write for the sheer joy of self-expression, when he so chooses, without seeming self-indulgent. Notice the playfulness in "Stealing Tomorrow," and in "Voe Doe Dee Oh Doe," a genial soft-shoe of a sketch which appears effortless in Harlan's hands, testifying to his artistic control. I defy anyone to read of "the sternwheeler spatterings of crazed hummingbirds" without smiling.

One important characteristic of a distinctive essay style is that it should resemble good conversation. Harlan is, of course, renowned as a conversationalist, and he is able to transfer that easy eloquence to the printed page. Perhaps not since Charles Lamb has an essayist employed such a rambling, conversational manner. This sometimes results in untidiness, for Harlan indulges in the delightful digressions which are common to both forms of expression, and such bypaths can lend a disjointed, patched-together quality. In this Harlan is apparently in the incomparable company of Montaigne, of whom Aldous Huxley said,

Free association artistically controlled—the paradoxical secret of his best essays. One damned thing after another, but in a sequence that in some almost miraculous way develops a theme and relates it to the rest of human experience.

Harlan's mastery of free association is nowhere better demonstrated than in "Revealed at Last! What Killed the Dinosaurs!" As he remarks himself at the beginning, "It seems disjointed and jumps around like water on a griddle, but it all comes together, so be patient."

Another characteristic vital to a distinctive essay style is charm. This came as a surprise to me, but the information certainly bolsters my assertion that the marriage between Harlan and the essay is a happy one, since Harlan has charm in abundance. Who can fail to be won by the self-effacement and wistful earnestness of "True Love," or simply the sparkle of an intelligent mind at work? Harlan appeals to us, as he puts it, "huckleberrily."

One could cite many other characteristics of Harlan's distinctive style; I had, for instance, prepared a lengthy section on his use of anger as a stylistic signature for inclusion here. But these traits are well-recognized by any reader who is at all familiar with his work, and it is enough to say that each of them—the arrogance, the irreverence, the gutsy ferocity, the occasional posturing—contributes to the singularity of style which is so vital a part of his success as an

essayist.

The third essential characteristic of the essay is a strong personal tone. The essay in prose has been compared to the lyric in poetry, in that it is an expression of subjective emotion. This is in perfectly good taste. Expressing as they do the writer's personality with an immediacy not possible in fiction, essays allow us to know essayists as we know no other writers. Harlan's work displays the colors of his passions and personality more vividly than almost any other essayist working today. As with all good essays, Harlan's absolutely seem to be written to the person reading them; to read them is an intimate, personal, familiar experience, partly because of the conversational tone noted earlier. As a result, readers somehow feel invited into his life by the intimacy of his work—I mean this quite literally—and to the degree that this is true it is a problem in his personal life. Harlan's essays have contributed to his becoming a legend. I use the word "legend" here with great care (*Webster*: "a notable person much talked about in his own time") acknowledging Harlan's concern that his charisma, some might say notoriety, may eclipse the seriousness of his work. I think this is unlikely. Other writers—George Bernard Shaw comes immediately to mind—have seen their wit and personalities become as famous as their work without compromise to their literary reputations.

In a recent conversation, Harlan remarked on having come to acknowledge the need to engage in cheap theatrics in order to get people's attention. Since all Harlan cares about is posterity, he will do whatever is necessary to be remembered long enough to be accorded his rightful place in literature. As he says of Fritz Leiber (in "A Few Too Few Words"), time and posterity will say what has to be said for him. He has already been acknowledged by his contemporaries, having won numerous awards for his short fiction, and presently sharing the record for Writer's Guild awards for work in television. Ironically, however, and at the risk of finding myself on the wrong side of a disagreement with Harlan, I venture to suggest that it may well be the strength and timelessness of his essays on which his reputation ultimately will rest. Harlan was the recipient of the 1982 Silver Pen award of American P.E.N., the politically-oriented association of professional writers, for a column which appeared in the *Los Angeles Weekly*. (It should be noted that in so doing, he edged out competitive entries from the best dailies in California.) I believe that this is but the first evidence of a growing awareness of his importance as a commentator.

As Baltasar Gracian says, "The sage has one advantage; he is immortal. If *this* is not his century, many others will be."

It seems to me sometimes that Harlan considers his essays rather

like stepchildren, and not the Serious Art of his fiction. I wish for all of us who admire his work and his message that he would allow himself to revel in his mastery of this powerful form in which he is so comfortable, and to acknowledge what he is, one of the most accomplished essayists of our time.

Postscript

These essays, including the earliest, have been revised as little as possible so that their original flavor is preserved, and they represent faithfully who and where Harlan was at the time he wrote them. In several instances this has resulted in contradiction, and some material which is obviously dated. So be it.

The explanations a writer gives himself for having written any particular book are often not the real reasons why that book has been written. Honesty is not the issue. Understanding is. A man does not write one novel at a time or one play at a time or even one quatrain at a time. He is engaged in the long process of putting his whole life on paper. He is on a journey and he is reporting in: "This is where I think I am and this is what this place looks like today."

—Irwin Shaw, 1964

YOU DON'T KNOW ME, I DON'T KNOW YOU

This essay appeared as the Introduction to the "Harlan Ellison Issue" of The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction in July 1977. Written as introductory material, this essay references three of Harlan's short fictions which are not to be found in this nonfiction collection. "Working with the Little People" is available in Strange Wine (Warner Books, 1979) and "Alive and Well and on a Friendless Voyage" and "Jeffy is Five" appear in Shatterday (Berkley Books, 1982)

When I wrote "The Place With No Name" for Ed Ferman, and he published it in *F&SF* in 1969, he received many outraged letters and a number of cancellations of subscriptions. That was a story in which I toyed with the idea that Christ had had a homosexual liaison with Prometheus.

When I wrote "Basilisk" for *F&SF* in 1972, a story in which I attacked not just our continued criminal presence in Vietnam, but made it quite clear that I considered all you stay-at-home, support-the-war-effort VFW and Kiwanis assholes as vile a pack of killers as William Calley, Ed Ferman received threatening letters and more cancellations.

When I rewrote the Book of Genesis from the viewpoint of the Snake, in "The Deathbird," in 1973, and suggested (as had dear sweet old Mark Twain) that if you really thought the universe was ruled by God, and you looked around at the state of the universe, you would be forced to the conclusion that God is a malign thug, all those good and tolerant Children of God and assorted other weirdos cancelled their subscriptions by the drove. Singular. I wasn't that *big* a deal. Only one small drove.

"Croatoan" in 1975 was interpreted by Right to Life advocates as a pro-abortion story, and *they* cancelled; it was viewed as an anti-female story by some feminists, and *they* cancelled; it was viewed as an anti-abortion story by many liberals, and *they* cancelled. The fact that the story was concerned with the ethics of responsibility and was concerned with abortion and/or feminism only as much and in the same way as *Moby Dick* is concerned with Cetacean philosophy, seemed to escape everyone who wrote poor Ed Ferman and called him a miserable sonofabitch for continuing to publish that swine motherfuckah Ellison, the toad of fantasy, the Antichrist of sf, the dark swimmer in the polluted sea of depraved reject mainstream fiction. I

went and had a vasectomy.

So one day about a year ago, when I was late getting a story in to Ed—which is usually the case, I’m always Harlequin late, poor Ed—and I was on the long distance line trying to con and jolly him into extending my deadline by a few days, I said to him, “Ed, tell me something: why is it, when you run the kind of apparently troublemaking stories I write, and you keep getting so many subscription cancellations and rotten letters from these turkeys, why is it you *keep* running my work?”

And Ed (who is an even tougher sonofabitch than I am, though his gentle and gentlemanly manner covers it so well only Audrey knows it for sure) said, “Well, I’ll tell you...even if I didn’t think they were good stories, which I do, I’d keep running your work and keep putting your name on the cover, because every time I run one of your stories I have twice as many people sign on as I do cancel.”

I gotta confess he stopped me with that one.

I sat there grinning wryly. And shaking my head.

He could have buttered me, or he could have said, well, kiddo, *someone* has to publish your shit, or he could have just shrugged it off. But he didn’t. He hit me right in my truth. And I flashed on that scene in the movie *The Longest Yard* where Burt Reynolds—in the words of the scenarist, Tracy Keenan Wynn—says, “You know what the trouble with my life has been? I’ll tell you. I’ve got my shit together. I’ve *always* had my shit together. I just can’t lift it.”

So here comes chill, truthful Ed Ferman, about two years ago, saying to me, “Let’s do a ‘Harlan Ellison’ issue of *F&SF*.”

“What do I have to do to deserve it, Ed...drop dead?”

“No, just write a story.”

That seemed easy enough.

But, well, hell, I didn’t get it done, so he did the Damon Knight issue first, and I can’t beef about that; Damon’s a good old boy and even though he thinks I disremember the pasts we shared, I like to see these venerable father-figures get an accolade from time to time. And finally my time has rolled around, much to the chagrin and annoyance of the turkeys.

But here comes Ed again, even after I’d said I wanted to do *three* stories for the issue, not just one, because Ray Bradbury had done two for his issue a few years ago, but nobody had ever done three, and I hoped that by doing three it would annoy that growing multitude that conceives of me as an arrogant, gauche loudmouth who never knows when to leave well enough alone...but even so, here comes Ed suggesting I do an “introduction” to the issue, just like the anthologies and collections I put together. Occurs to me that Ed Ferman has a thick vein of suicidal behavior in him.

So I'm sitting here in Geo. Alec Effinger's apartment on Prytania Street in New Orleans, while Bev and George and gorgeous Susan are out hustling for beads and doubloons at the Rex parade, it's Mardi Gras and I'm inside writing words for Ed Ferman instead of having a helluva good time goofing off, and I'm wondering just how much truth Ed and you readers can handle in the honorable name of "upfront."

And I decide, screw it; let them have it all, because it's been a shitty few months and maybe just this once the clowns who are pissed off that Silverberg and Malzberg and Lupoff and Effinger and the rest of us don't want "sci-fi" on our books will get sufficiently doused with cold truth so they'll stop looking at those of us who write this stuff with that peculiar brand of tunnel vision that is half deification and half hatred.

(Now what the hell's he angry about? Every time I turn around that creep Ellison is shooting off his big mouth about some fancied crime or other. Can't open my morning paper or turn on the box without hearing that strident voice complaining about somedamnthing or other. What the devil does *he* have to be angry at? He makes a lot of money, he gets laid regularly, there are even people dumb enough to think he has some writing talent. And here he's got this whole bloody *magazine* devoted to feeding his twisted ego. You'd think he'd have enough grace just to say something short and polite and let his stories do the talking for him. But no, he's *angry* again! Now what?)

Angry? Heaven forbid, gentle readers. I wouldn't want to disturb your sleep.

Nevertheless, in the spirit of creative troublemaking, come with me to the October 4th, 1976 issue of *Publishers Weekly*, the "bible of the book industry." In the pages of *PW* one can gauge one's stature in the publishing world, assess one's worth with one's peer-group and, more importantly, with the plantation owners who keep us poor wretches laboring in their fields.

Let us glance at the cover of the October 4th, 1976 issue of *PW*, where we see a full-page ad for Sterling Hayden's first novel, *Voyage*. Putnam's has taken this ad, as they have the next ten pages, to announce their winter list. It's unveiling time for one of the major publishers, and they're stating for all the world to see the importance of their forthcoming titles. Go with me, then, on this voyage of status and hype.

I promise you it'll be worth the trip.

Now. We start with Sterling Hayden. He gets almost one hundred large-type words of thrilling copywriters' adrenaline, including announcements that *Voyage* is a full selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, paperback rights have been sold for more than a half-million dollars, there will be TV appearances by the author, as well as

major national advertising, publicity & promotion, not to mention a 50,000 copy first printing. Add to all this a snappy perspective photo of the book itself and the fact that it's *on the front cover of PW*, and only the dumbest among us can fail to perceive that this is a B*I*G B*O*O*K!!!

Well, okay. Hayden can write. *Wanderer*, back in 1963, his autobiography, was a smashing book. He deserves all this attention. No complaints.

Now we open the issue and plunge pell-mell into Putnam's winter list, in order of importance and (as Putnam's views it) saleability.

Pages 2 and 3 contain six books, three to a page...still with full-cover photos of each book, titles set in large black, eye-catching type, each one with a dense block of promotional copy, and each one bearing the potent slug-line, "Major Advertising & Promotion." Among these books are a biography of Clark Gable, a "dazzling biography that reads like the most romantic novel," and a book of "startlingly intimate portraits" titled *Ginger, Loretta and Irene* Who? Each of these six is trumpeted as being the forerunner of a motion picture version or is to be accompanied by TV appearances by the author or is a full selection of this book club or that. Impressive.

Pages 4 and 5, another six. Each one to receive "Major Advertising & Promotion," another six full-cover photos, six more blocks of breathless advertising copy, and on and on.

Page 6. Six books on one page, but still with full-color photos, albeit smaller, of course. The titles say it all: *Nine Moons Wasted* by Marianne Lamont; *This Other Eden* by Marilyn Harris; *Foxglove Summer* by Naidra Grey; *Sweet's Folly* by Fiona Hill; and more hype copy. Page 7 has two more romances, one by Jean Plaidy and one by Claire Rayner, as well as a Jack Douglas book of funny "misadventures," whatever that means. Three on this page, each with "Major Advertising & Etcetera." Full cover photos. Lotta hype. Quotes.

Page 8 and page 9: six and six, including such well-promoted winners as *Moon Signs* by Sybil Leek; *Sinister People*, *The Looking-Glass World of the Left-Hander*; *Gilbert and Sullivan and Their Victorian World*; and a book of myths and heroes of the Viking Age. Each has a cover photo; each has a block of copy, each has its title in easily read heavy black headline type.

On page 9, four-fifths of the page is devoted to six titles, two westerns and four mysteries. Each one has a full cover photo, each one has a big bold title, each one has a block of promotional copy wherein the words spectacular, taut, exciting, delightful, gripping, intriguing and exciting *new* appear with the frequency of chocolate chips in a Famous Amos Cookie.

Now pay close attention.

At the bottom of page 9, positionally only the minutest fraction more important than the books on gardening and microwave cookery that live on page 10, are four titles in the bottom one-fifth of the page. These four books are labeled with a genre designation as *no other books in this 54 book list* have been ghettoized! The label, not to put too fine or obvious a point on it, is SCIENCE FICTION.

The four books are Spider Robinson's first novel, the new F.M. Busby and the new Poul Anderson and...

Our Lady of Darkness by Fritz Leiber.

There are no cover photos. There is no advertising hype. There is no explanatory copy block. The titles are small. No words like "exciting" or "taut" or even "spectacular." Just the title of the book, the author's name, the Library of Congress catalog number, date of publication and price.

Fritz Leiber's first novel in eight years, down at the very bottom of the next-to-last page of his publishers' seasonal trumpeting? Fritz Leiber, the finest fantasist in the world, a man whose work has influenced every writer of imaginative literature since the Thirties. Wonderful, magical Fritz Leiber, before whom Bradbury and Sturgeon and Norton and Goldman and Barth and Vonnegut bow, not to mention Robinson, Busby, Anderson and even yours truly, the maddest egomaniac of them all. Fritz Leiber, very likely the best of all of us, the man who has won more awards than anyone else in the genre, the man whose words have lifted this too-often wretched category to Olympian heights more times than anyone cares to mention. Fritz Leiber's first novel in eight years is buried at the bottom of Putnam's discard pile, secure in its 1200-copy library sale, without Major Advertising & Promotion and screw the old man!?!†

Fritz Leiber's first novel in eight years isn't as worthy of attention as the first novel of an actor, no matter how well it's written...it isn't as important as Sybil Leek's astrological bullshit...it isn't as important as a pair of westerns...it isn't as important as a six-pack of insipid romantic novels...?

Why is that asshole Ellison angry?

Why does he insist "science fiction" be deleted from his books, and nowhere be permitted in advertising or promotion of what he writes? (Though God knows it's virtually impossible to stop half-witted collegiate reporters from slapping "sci-fi" into the headline when they interview him for college lectures.)

Ellison is angry, gentle readers, because Phyllis Schlafly has unlimited access to The Johnny Carson Show where her observations on Freedom vs. Equality are only slightly less illuminating than David Letterman's views about The Ethical Structure of the Universe and one of *our* finest young "sci-fi" writers can't fight off the medical collection

agencies trying to collect from his last three major operations while he waits with happy thoughts about his fourth exploratory, coming up next month. The big mouth is angry because the bestseller lists include the mediocre dribblings of Leon Uris, Rod McKuen, Jacqueline Susann, Allen Drury and Harold Robbins, while another of our giants of “sci-fi” lives in a one-room apartment in a slum section of a major American city, sitting on the edge of his bed with his typewriter on a kitchen chair, his Hugos shoved away on a high shelf because he hasn’t room for them in that cramped space where he exists in poverty.

You don’t know me. You don’t know any of us. You live in your little Utopia of dreams, not realizing that the men and women you totemize at conventions return, in too many cases, to lives of anonymity and financial deprivation. You are instantly on your guard against any of us promoting ourselves, “selling out” to make a decent living, without understanding that most of the terrific publishers whom you revere, still pay the biggest name authors little better than they did twenty-five years ago, when a loaf of bread was 13 cents and a cup of coffee was a nickel. You buy ripoff cassettes of the writers’ speeches and readings, without understanding that you are contributing to the theft of annuities. You think it mercenary and bad taste when writers demand payment for their appearances at conventions. You think all of us live in crystal palaces, surrounded by slavish toadies who do our bidding for the glory of being in *The Presence Magical*.

And when one or another of us says, “Why, when I’m writing brilliant novels of deep human perceptivity, does *Perry Rhodan* sell millions of copies while my books go out of print?” and then opts out of the rat race, you bare your fangs and run white feather numbers on us. Traitor to the Cause! Quisling! Coward! Sour grapes!

You don’t know me, and I don’t know you.

I don’t know any of you who write me letters and tell me either how my stories have altered your lives immeasurably or how my stories are sick and twisted and how I obviously hate women because I had a dog eat a girl in one of them.

How can you know people who refuse to permit your humanity? How can you relate to people who either see you as a monster whose works are created solely to shock and corrupt the Natural Order, or who deify you like the shade of Voltaire?

How can I know you, when you choose to read craziness into my words? When you think every story I write is an accurate and faithful representation of my life? When, if I write about homosexuality or drug addiction or venality or violence, you start your imbecilic rumor-mill that I’m gay, a junkie, greedy beyond rationality or a crazed

killer?

Do I jest?

Several years ago, at the last sf convention I attended without being paid a speaking fee to appear, the World Convention in Washington, D.C., I found myself quite late one night, wasted and exhausted, standing in front of an elevator, waiting for the car to arrive to take me upstairs to my floor, to my room, to my bed, to blessed sleep. Understand: it was three or four in the morning, I was weary beyond belief, and minding my own business. As I stood there waiting, a rather large, fleshy young man festooned with buttons saying things like FIAWOL and TANSTAAFL and SF FANS EAT THEIR YOUNG approached the elevator.

When he saw me, he did a double-take. Then an expression I've come to recognize and despise crossed his face. It was that insipid melding of antagonism and superciliousness that I have learned from bitter experience precedes some smartass remark intended to make the fan think he's into clever repartee. As these remarks usually emanate from terminal acne teen-agers with overactive thyroids and underdeveloped manners, I have yet to be gifted with a line that does not reek of cliché and sophomorphism.

(You don't know me. I'm forty-two years old, and I've spent a good part of my life with the wittiest, cleverest, most innovative people of my time. I've heard the best and the brightest indulging their conversational muses. Some great lines, a lot of whacky linkages, terrific humor and originality. And you...you *pishers*...you really think some derivative, cornball insult out of St. Louis or Joplin is going to be *new* to me? Be even the fleetingest momentarily clever so you'll receive the dollop of cheap attention your miserable little ego demands? Don't be ridiculous. When you can beat Groucho Marx or Bella Abzug or Mel Torme with a clever line, *then* you can come around and try to bug me. Until then, stay in the Pony League.)

The elevator arrived, the doors opened, I entered and the beefy adolescent did the same. I pushed the button for my floor, which was quite high up in the building, but the kid didn't push a button for *his* floor. If I thought about it—and you must remember I was really out of it, just hanging against the wall with my eyes down and my energy-level low—I suppose I concluded he was on the same floor as I.

But no sooner had the doors closed than the kid struck a pose. Arms folded, legs apart, staring at me with insolence, as if about to say something devastating. I hung against the wall, thinking, *Gimme a little slack, willya, kid. No bullshit tonight. I'm too tired.*

But the rudeness of that kind of simp is beyond measure. And beyond logic or restraint. He stood there arrogantly and said, "You're a lot shorter than I thought you'd be."

I ignored him. I was in no mood.

Anyone playing with a full deck would have taken the hint. It was by no means a subtle hint. I clearly didn't want to be messed with. But like so many of his type, stupidity and ill-justified arrogance make unsatisfactory bedmates, and he thought he was making points because I hadn't told him to shut up, or punched him out, or done something that would permit him to lie to his friends about how he'd "destroyed Ellison."

So he kept it up. Kept insulting me—a total stranger—all the way up to my floor.

Then, when the elevator slowed and was stopping, I looked up and moved toward the front doors of the cage. He stepped in front of me, arms akimbo. I stood there as the elevator rose to a stop, and waited for him to move, but he didn't. He just stood in front of me, facing me, hands on his hips, as if daring me to do something. It not only became clear to me at this point that he didn't live on the same floor as I, but that he very likely had taken the entire elevator trip just to piss me off.

As the doors opened behind him, without even looking, I reached out very quickly with my right hand, and closed my fingers around his throat. Not hard enough to crush the sucker's windpipe, but hard enough to propel him backward easily. Out of the elevator, around in a half-circle, and pushed him back into the elevator, just as the doors closed. It was all done very smoothly, very quickly, and with an absolute minimum of emotional involvement. He had been an impediment to my progress toward a good night's sleep, and I had simply *moved* him.

But as I turned around from the closed elevator doors, I saw what I had missed seeing when the doors had first opened—probably because my eyes were downcast and I was concentrating on grabbing the simp's throat. Standing there, mouths open, gaping at the sight of the killer and his prey, was a group of six or eight fans who had apparently left a party and were on their way down to the lobby. They had seen the doors open, and without warning the crazed Ellison had attacked this poor, defenseless fan.

I said nothing to them, simply turned down the corridor and went to my room and went to bed.

But the *next* day...

The rumor that was all over the convention hotel was that Ellison had thrown a fan down an elevator shaft.

Many people believed it.

None of them bothered to ask why the police hadn't been called, or how I'd managed to get the elevator doors open when the cage wasn't there so my victim *could* be tossed down a shaft; or whether

the victim had died; and if he had, was the body still lying down there at the bottom, broken and beginning to smell bad, or had it been spirited away by Ellison's troglodyte minions, and why hadn't Ellison been arrested?

They simply believed it. They don't know me, and I don't want to know them.

And just to deny the rumor-mill any fresh material (not that it needs actual material when it works so well from whole cloth), let me tell you where the three new stories in this issue of *F&SF* came from. In that way, at least, I'll save myself from having to endure the boring recitations in half-witted fanzines that purport to be knowledgeable analyses of what I *really* meant, analyses of the twisted psycho-sexual references that fill the stories. I'll free myself of having to bear that silliness, at least for these three stories. Which means all the rest are still fair game for the functional illiterates who do most of the fanzine critiques.

"Working With the Little People" was written in one straight stretch of effort in the front window of a bookstore on Charing Cross Road in London, Tuesday 20 July 1976. The bookstore was *Words and Music*, and I was reprising my sitting-in-a-bookstore-window-writing-a-story-a-day number as explicated more thoroughly in *F&SF* last October. It is not a representation of myself, in any way. It is, I suppose, an open letter to a famous fantasy writer on whose wonderful stories I grew up. This writer is a person who has become a good friend, someone I love. And because of my respect and affection for this writer, and because of the germinal effect on my writing that the body of this writer's work had on me during my formative years, it is impossible for me to say to this writer, you stopped writing your best work over twenty years ago. It is impossible for me to take this writer aside and say, "Just for a moment let's forget that we're both eminently successful, that we're canonized by fans and critics. *They don't know!* But we know. We know what each of us is writing, and we know when the time has come that we're only indulging ourselves because our fame is such that they'll buy *whatever* we write, no matter how effective or slapdash. For just a moment let's forget we're who we are, and just look at what you've been doing for twenty years!" No, it's not possible for me to tell this writer of classic stature that somehow the publicity and the fame and the totemization have gotten in the way of writing the stories that made the fame in the first place.

Ego forms the greater part of whatever nameless amalgam it is that sustains a writer. We live off it, every one of us, no matter how ostensibly humble or arrogant we may seem to our readers. The mildest of us, nonetheless, has an ability to sustain himself through sheer will, through sheer belief in the cosmic *correctness* of what we

do. Every word we set down, every choice of line and color and structure is surfeited with that ego. I cannot tell this writer that the vision has grown dim. The talent is still there, as rich and as dark as before. But the world and its praise, its wonders and treasures, has gotten in the way. I may be wrong. The later stories may be the best this writer has ever produced; but unless I read all the critics wrong, and unless I read the tenor of this writer's audience wrong, and unless I read my own loving perceptions of this writer's work wholly incorrectly...the main path has been abandoned.

So this story is my gentle way of speaking to this writer.

Perhaps the writer will recognize what I'm doing in "Working With the Little People." And perhaps I'll get a phone call and this writer, with whom I talk frequently, will say, "I read your story. Did you mean me?" And I'll say, fearfully, "Yeah." And perhaps the writer will say, "Let's talk. I'm not sure you know what the hell you're talking *about*, but at least you cared enough to say it and risk my wrath and the loss of my friendship; so at least let's sit down alone and thrash it out."

I hope that's what will happen.

As for the second story, "Alive and Well and on a Friendless Voyage," well, that one seems to distress my friends a bit. Arthur Cover says he thinks it may be self-pitying. Richard Delap wonders if I'm not exploiting my own life. Geo. Alec Effinger thinks it's one of my most important stories. But most of my friends who've read it refuse to talk to me about it. I can understand that.

This is one of those few stories I've written not only to write a story, to provide an entertainment, but as personal therapy. I wrote it during the period after the breakup of my recent marriage. It was my fourth marriage, and not one I entered into lightly.

You see, you don't know me. Many of you think that four marriages is an indication of frivolity or confusion or bad judgment. They *may* be all of those, but as far as I'm concerned, they are also indications that I'm alive. Everyone wants action, adventure and danger in their life...but no one wants risk. Everyone wants guarantees of security.

Friends, there is no security this side of the grave.

I've said that before.

I say it again.

I married in June of 1976 and I separated on November 20th of 1976. She was sleeping with another man. That seems pretty slim reason for dissolution of a marriage, particularly in my case, because I've never felt that merely because you marry someone that your mate's body belongs to you. Slavery went out of fashion a long time

ago. But there was lying, duplicitousness, insincerity, and a great many other elements that destroyed trust. And without trust, without friendship, there is nothing. One is left with dust.

I loved her. In the words of one of the characters in the story, "Without reserve. I showed it in a million ways, every hour of the day that we spent together." But love is hardly enough to sustain a relationship, dear friends. And it fell apart, and so did I.

And one night three or four months after I had asked her to leave, and she had gone to live with her paramour, I was sitting in the darkness of my living room watching the American Film Theater's production of *Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris* on our Los Angeles unedited-movie channel, and something I cannot even remember in that production, some moment of melancholy as expressed through Brel's exquisite songs, sparked the basic idea for this story.

I'm frequently asked where my ideas come from. I usually can remember where the story was written, and under what special circumstances; but less often I'm able to recall just what precise elements came together in my mind to form the basic concept of a given piece of writing. That's the case with "Alive and Well and on a Friendless Voyage." All I know for certain is that I went in and sat down at the typewriter and did the first two pages of the story.

And I realized from the start that it was my way of writing out my pain and loneliness.

You see, you don't know me and I don't know you. The ways in which you bring your pain under control, the ways in which you maintain your sanity...they are not mine. I live in another world; each of us does. But I know this of myself: I can keep going. That's one of the things life is all about...*maintaining*. And that is what the story is about.

In the space of three or four months toward the end of last year—the most terrible period in my entire life—my mother died, my wife cuckolded me and left, I suffered staggering financial difficulties, endured personal illness, went more than a little crazy...but maintained. Now I'm on the other side of it all. And that's what the story is about. It is the grail I have brought back from that awful place. It is the artifact that shows I felt the fire but did not let it destroy me.

All of the foregoing, sententious though it may read, is straight from where my thoughts lie, to you. Take it or leave it. It's not as if none of you had ever asked.

But my favorite of the three stories in this issue is the one called "Jeffy Is Five." I began this story during a New Year's party at the home of my friend Walter Koenig. We were all sitting around in

Walter & Judy's living room, and there was a group of people who were mostly the Koenigs' friends, not mine. Nice people, I just didn't know them very well. And I was sitting there sorta kinda doing and thinking nothing, just goofing and relaxing, playing with Walter's kids, when I *intentionally mis-overheard* a line of conversation.

Let me explain that.

Quite a lot of the time (probably more of the time than a psychiatrist would consider sane or rational), I intentionally hear things wrong. If someone says, "I went to the Chinese hand laundry this afternoon," I visualize it in my mind as an enormous, steamy plant where they launder Chinese hands. Or how about this one: the other night I was talking to Nancy Schwartz and one or the other of us mentioned tubal ligation. I chose to hear it as tubal *libation* and proceeded to run half a dozen horrendous puns on the historic precedent of magic being attendant on the drinking of menstrual blood. Don't be shocked, dummies, Sturgeon once wrote an entire novel on the theme. Then Nancy did tubal *legation*, I did *tonal relation*, she did *tribal locution* and we were busy for half an hour being as improbable as possible.

Because of this flaw in my nature, this desire to hear things a little stranger than the speaker intended, I heard a snatch of perfectly ordinary conversation as something like this, "So I went to see Jeff, and he was five...he's always five..." and my mind flashed on a little boy who has been snared at the age of five, who never gets any older. And I asked Walter for a typewriter, and he brought me a portable, and I set it on a chair and did the first several pages of the story in this issue. (Except I rewrote those first two hurried pages considerably.) But the story would go no further.

It wasn't till I came down here to New Orleans that I discovered what my story was about. From New Year's till February it just festered and simmered. But then, while talking to George and Beverly last evening, while talking about how times have changed and about how we're losing so many wonderful things that meant so much to us and which we took so much for granted, did I understand what Jeffty and his story was all about. And so today I've been sitting here writing this introduction, and when it gets too boring I stop and work on Jeffty a little.

And Jeffty is so real to me, so important to me, that I'm writing about him very slowly. I don't want the story to be ended. I want Jeffty to go on forever.

Because you don't know me, and you don't know that there is a part of Jeffty that is me, very much me, achingly me.

Which brings me, I suppose, to the end of this introduction that poor Ed Ferman so foolishly suggested I write.

I swear to you: I had intended only to say thank you very much for coming this evening, folks, and it's been a terrific pleasure writing for you. I intended to be brief and very gracious. But who the hell would I be kidding? I'm not that gracious, and if I'd ever wanted to be brief I'd have either become a poet or taken up selling Fruit of the Loom underwear.

So, six thousand words later, I tag off mumblingly, wondering precisely *what* I had to say that was endemic to this special issue of *F&SF*; probably nothing of any consequence. Except to point out that all the king's horses and all the king's men, and all the academy's critics and all the establishment's analysts, and all of fandom's turkeys and all of their fanzine editors cannot fathom or reconstruct the mind that writes these stories. Nor the minds that write Leiber's stories and Sturgeon's stories, or Borges's stories and Vonnegut's stories, or Wilhelm's stories or Effinger's stories. We are all alone, each of us, existing in worlds we make fresh each day. And those of you who are granted the views into our worlds are like tourists going into *Terra Incognita* after we've blazed the trails.

But don't ever fool yourselves. Not even those of you who make your living from literary analyses. Don't for a second fool yourselves into thinking you've got our number.

Because even if I reveal some small truth about the human heart in my work, strictly serendipitously, strictly by chance, I really don't know you, and that's the way I want to keep it, because I subscribe to what H. L. Mencken said: "It is precisely at their worst that human beings are most interesting."

I want to keep being surprised by all of you.

How boring it would be if *all* of you were as predictable and dull as so many of you seem to be.

Those of you out there whom I'll meet and write about one day: I don't know you.

And for all the rest of you...

Believe it, kiddo: you don't know me.

STEALING TOMORROW

The following appeared as the introduction to a 1974 reprint of Harlan's short story "Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman" in Tom Reamy's fanzine Trumpet. Because it was written to segue into the story it may seem to tail off rather awkwardly but it begs nevertheless to be reprinted here.

My soul would be an outlaw. I can do nothing with it.

The coward body my soul inhabits has pleaded with the renegade, has cried for pity, has implored the pistolero, my soul, to live safely, to observe quietly, to live in peace, with a degree of contentment.

My soul curses like the guttersnipe it is, and hurls another molotov cocktail at my complacency. So I am doomed. My soul *will be* an outlaw. It will be Zorro, dressed in black, carving its initials in the sane and the rational. It will be Jean Lafitte, stalking through the Louisiana swamp of my days and nights, prepared to defend my cringing, cowardly self from the invaders called compromise. It will be a cocoo Charlie Chaplin, hurling a pie at whatever it takes to live quietly, sensibly, safely.

And here am I, trapped in the body with this dangerous, unpredictable outlaw, who seems determined to alienate, to upset, to annoy, to harass and chivvy and unsettle me.

I lust for the day when soul transplants come to be.

For my soul, the masked *bandido*, is a dreamer. He is engaged in the biggest caper of them all. I take this moment while the soul is out on one of its forays against the decent and proper folk of the world, to set down and relate its plans. To apprise you that the outlaw Attila Genghis Khan John Brown marauder is planning the greatest theft of all time.

My mad soul would steal tomorrow.

He would wrest tomorrow from the jaws of today and turn it topsy-turvy. He would come lumbering into town on a pink-and-yellow elephant, fast as Pegasus, and throw down on the established order. At gunpoint, the depraved and lunatic soul would order that tomorrow be handed over, and then, wheeling, gallop off, back to his lair in the Rainbow Plaid Mountains, where he would hold tomorrow hostage, raping and pillaging her, till her brains turned to cotton candy.

I hasten to assure you, I am no party to this depravity. I am a quiet

country boy merely trying to make a peaceful way in the world. It is this outlaw soul of mine who is the troublemaker.

And I can only repeat what he says about his motivations, in hopes someone can arrive in time to thwart his nefarious plans.

What my soul says is this:

Anthropologists tell us that from what they have been able to ascertain, from skulls found in the caves at Baden, Germany, that the “reasoning” section of man’s brain, the cerebellum of modern man, is many times larger than that of the primates. But the area that contains the emotions, the medulla, is precisely the same size. We have become creatures capable of sending rockets to the Moon, capable of probing the bottom of the oceans, capable of computing and assaying and estimating and dreaming, but we are still naked apes when our emotions are excited.

My soul says, tomorrow cannot be trusted to naked apes. My soul seems to think he is Robin Hood, stealing from the ill-equipped to give to the as-yet-unborn. I cannot argue with my soul, it will hear no counter-suggestion. And what can I do? I’m trapped in here with the lunatic.

My soul says he has received “The Call.” That he has been touched by the Maker. (And I fear to ask him *which* Maker, or *what* Maker, for fear he will tell me...and I don’t want to know, not really!)

My soul, in his more rational moments, tells me that he will cease raiding when, and only when, men come to realize that all other men are noble. He tells me he will lay back and let the world handle itself only when color and creed and race and religion cease being interfaces between other men. He says he has had “the call” and his mission is to keep the posse out looking for him, because that will keep them aware of the fact that not everyone can be sold into slavery quite so easily.

You can see my situation. My problem is one of helplessness. I mean no ill, I mean no offense. It is this carnivorous soul, this Mr. Hyde in my eminently sane and rational Dr. Jekyll body.

If you want *my* opinion, my soul is crazy. I don’t think charmingly crazy, like one of the Marx Brothers, I mean stoned righteously crazy, with a lack of humility, without a vestige of reverence, without a response in him that would keep him in line and safe and following along the way others would follow. I think he ought to be locked up. I hope to God the posse catches him. That’s what *I* hope.

But he’s cunning, you see. He comes equipped with dreams, and they are weapons of frightful potency. He uses them shamefully, if you ask me. He rails against the most sensible directives from the world, he curses those who set the rules, he refuses to listen or accept even the most rational reasons for the most sensible acts.

Let me give you a for instance.

My soul is never on time.

If my soul tells you he'll be there at seven o'clock, look for him next Thursday. He flouts the rigors and rules of punctuality, and when I insist that he is once again shaking up the natural order of things, he unleashes one of his dreams on me, saying Thoreau was right when he wrote: "He serves the State best who opposes the State most." (If you want *my* opinion, Thoreau's soul was an outlaw, too.)

DOWN THE RABBIT-HOLE TO TV-LAND

The following three essays present a fascinating study of the evolution of Harlan's views on television. "Down the Rabbit-Hole to TV-Land" was written for Cad magazine in 1967 while Harlan was actually working in the medium. "Revealed at Last! What Killed the Dinosaurs! And You Don't Look So Terrific Yourself" is a slightly-shortened version of the Introduction to his 1978 fiction collection Strange Wine. "Epiphany" was a 1982 guest editorial for Video Review magazine. None of these essays is drawn from his weekly columns on television which appeared in the Los Angeles Free Press from 1968 to 1972 and which are collected in The Glass Teat and The Other Glass Teat (Ace, 1983).

Attaining success in Hollywood is like climbing a gigantic mountain of cow-flop, to pluck from the top one perfect rose. And you find, after having made that hideous ascent...that you have lost the sense of smell.

The late Charles Beaumont, himself a writer of stature who was compelled to make the ascent, said that to me when I arrived in Clown Town. I was filled with spice and flame about Hollywood hacks and how they ground out lousy scripts for the fastbuck, thus enabling them to get hammered that much quicker while frying beside their swimming pools.

Lord, how the silly have fallen. Lessons learned, ah me. Five years, two dozen scripts, and several lobotomies later, I sit here behind the typewriting machine that has earned me my living, and I wonder—where did it all go? That innocence of childhood or nature that once I possessed.

One of these days, when my soul comes back Martinized from Beelzebub, Sathanus and Daemon: TV Producers and Dry Cleaners (sale of same was one of the unalterable conditions of my last script-writing contract with them, to plot a one-hour seg of their top-Trendex-rated series, *Darwin a Go-Go*). I will write a funny novel about a good writer slowly masticated 'tween the teeth of the television industry. It will be based on my experiences.

It will be titled "Dial 9 To Get Out."

It won't *really* be funny. It will be gallows humorous. Music of sackbut, lyre, and dulcimer; with a *capella* accompaniment interstitially by the rattle of doomed souls. I will cry as I write it. It won't sell. No one would believe it.

How could anyone be expected to believe:

I am sitting in a conference with I. A. Trepidation, producer of the new adventure series *SubSunk*, his four aides, the Sycophant Brothers, and a network executive I shall hereafter refer to as The Mole (chiefly because he has never seen the light). We are discussing my forthcoming script for the series. The Mole is at the far end of a monstrously long table, and I am being urbane, smiling just a bunch.

The Mole has been performing what is euphemistically referred to as Network Continuity on my work. He has been “bettering” my script by offering suggestions such as the following: “Mr. Ellison, you have a character here named Philip Trelawney, don’t you?” I nod, assured. “Well, you can’t have that, you know.”

“Why not?” I ask this, naive lad that I am, wide-eyed and innocent of the essential grisliness of reality.

“Because it’s an English name.”

He pauses. He’s trying to tell me something. I am stupid. I do not understand. “Right. English,” I say. I am delighted at his immediate grasp of the intricacies of the plot. “But why not?”

“Because it might offend.”

“Whom?” I inquire, grammatically.

“The *English*.” He explains this to me as if I were a waterhead: in broad terms, like a Giant Golden Book.

Reeling, I counter: “Uh, okay. Would you like me to change it?”

He lips a knife-thin piranha grin.

I do a Huck Finn. “How about Philip *Wesley*?”

He nods agreement.

I have cleverly substituted an English name for an English name.

This was the *sanest* exchange of the conference.

“And here at the big finale in the last act—” The Mole jabs a finger at my script (my script groans from the prod), “—when you have the female spy holding a gun on the crew, about to open the hatch to flood the submerged sub...”

“Yes, yes, go on!” I breathlessly exclaim.

“...well, have one of the crew jump her, and grab at her face and rip off this rubber mask she’s wearing, and she’s not beautiful, but really *ogly*!” He sits back, delighted with himself.

There is an extended moment of silence such as one finds only at the bottom of the Cayman Trench.

From the tomb I ask softly, “Why?”

Indrawn breaths from Trepidation and the Sycophant Brothers; David dares to question Goliath. An affront!

The Mole leans forward and steeples his fingers before him. He looks like Torquemada on the scent of a heretic. “Because I saw it in *From Russia, With Love*, and I liked it.”

“Yeah, well, *I* saw it in *From Russia, With Love*, too, and *I* liked it, but what the hell does it have to do with the script?”

“Nothing, but it looks good. So use it.”

“No thanks, friend.” I am getting a steely tone in my voice. “I will *not* use it. It’s gratuitous, silly, and stolen from someone else’s work. I have this thing about obvious plagiarism. We *won’t* use it.”

Secure in his power, The Mole snarls. “Don’t argue with me, kid, just use it! Writers are toadies, they do what they’re told.”

And I go berserk. I run amuck. I climb on the table, scuttle down its length and fasten on him, shrieking hideous obscenities. It is the culmination of hours of demeaning acquiescence on my part, of arrogant stupidity on his part, of a systematic evisceration of anything meritorious and original in *my creation*. I attack him.

I was intent that he should go to his grave with my teeth in his throat. I hauled back and drove one right into the center of his imbecilic face. He went over backward in the chair and hit the edge of a low table standing behind him against the wall. The table fell and as he sat there on his ass a full-scale model of the *U.S.S. Guava Jelly*—the sub used in the series—fell on him.

I was salivating like a Pavlovian dog.

Trepidation and two of his Sycophants hauled me off, twitching most horribly and, still doing a cardio-vascular adagio, I was manhandled into the next office, where they forced me into a padlocked chair (reserved for deranged writers). “Whaddaya tryin’ to do, Ellison, kill me with the network?” Trepidation stood before me, twitching and sweating. His funny little belly protruded from under his shirt-jac like Fat Stuff, the character in the Smilin’ Jack comic strip who was always popping off buttons that were instantly gobbled up by a chicken always following him around. I. A.’s eyeballs protruded, too: Trepidation is a very outgoing man.

He pleaded, a rising note of hysteria in his voice, “Do it, willya, *please* do it! Or *we* will!”

Later, when they revived me, I did it. It was either Ellison or one of the taxidermists (most of whom are card-carrying spastics) in the production staff. On that script I did 17 separate and individual rewrites 17. Count ’em 17. And after I was off the script, there were eight more.

Inevitably, when I saw a “rough cut” of the show, before it was scheduled for network airing, I invoked the clause of the Writers’ Guild contract with the Producers Guild to have a pseudonym put on the segment. It was the first flight of “Cordwainer Bird.”

It went on the air. It was a ghastly show. I did not call my relatives in Ohio and suggest they watch it. But they will put it into syndication

one day soon, and the damned thing will return on Channel 5 every few months to haunt me. And how do I cop out for it?

Because at that point—so few months after I'd arrived in Hollywood—I realized one of the inescapable facts of life: the writer in television is little more than chattel.

S/he writes the script, and from that point on s/he not only has no *control* of it, s/he is considered a nuisance, someone to be circumvented, someone to flummox, to shunt into a closet, where s/he waits, purring mechanically, till the next occasion for corrupt services arises. And when the segment is aired—having been rewritten and re-written by an endless succession of “creative typists” (as Bernard Wolfe refers to the script doctors)—it has had leached out of it any vestige of originality or individuality the author-of-record brought to it. It has been reduced to the lowest possible common denominator. It is fit fare for the American Viewing Public—according to the network and ad agency analysts, whose studies of all of us out here in Viewersville invariably come up with an I.Q. level somewhere south of cretinous.

And when the segment is aired, and panned, the writer is the first one to receive the judo chop. “Dreary script,” the *Hollywood Reporter* intones. “Hack writing,” *Daily Variety* opines. “Dreck!” says Marya Mannes; “Shit!” says Jack O'Brian; “Sententious fustion tinged with sesquipedalianism,” says Cleveland Amory, but what the hell does *he* know.

So to whom do you appeal? Whom do you assault? How do you explain? The mark of Cain is upon you, and depending on where you worked last, that takes the shape of a giant eye, an ugly peacock or the first three letters of the alphabet.

But crying the blues is the easiest part of it. The damage it does to individual writers, turning them into shambling no-talents fit only to write the same sight-gags again and again for situation comedies no more demanding than a good bowel movement...the persistent debasement of what might have once been a genuine art-form, but is now little more than a pimp for consumer goods...the perpetuation of false images and outright lies as a view of our times, thus furthering a kind of societal schizophrenia...the renunciation of any responsibility to the millions of Americans who *lend* the use of *their* airwaves...these are the greater crimes. Crimes we are now only beginning to realize 'have been committed. For all around us we are beginning to see the effects of these depredations: entire generations of teen-agers surfeited with the phoniness of television's picture of their world...a world that does not jibe with what they walk through daily; the jackleg yellow journalism that has slopped over into every medium of news presentation; the watering-down of values by applauding *everything*

and plugging in a laugh-track where no applause could *ever* be garnered, so we no longer know what is talent and what is talentless; the totemization of the graceless and tasteless and debased so we have no respect for those things in our world that aspire to loveliness or permanence or quality for their sales alone.

Is there an explanation for it? The explanation is complex; in its coils and convolutions lie the reasons why television is so banal; why the producers, advertisers, studios, networks and second-guessers feel they must appeal to the monkey mentality.

To follow the reasoning from inception to final airing on your television set is very much like unscrambling the Laocoonian serpent, or swallowing your own tail. It is like the famous William Tenn short story about the man who tries to find out who is *really* at the top of the power structure of his corrupt and regimented society. He rises up and up through the layers of power, finding the instructions always coming down from above. And when he gets to the top, he finds himself back at the bottom, for the society is not being run by one strongman at the apex of the pyramid, but by himself. So it is with television. The corruption is so widespread, such a malignant infection, that no one in the entire maze of network memos and fear is free of the taint. Unravel the serpent, all right, let's try, quickly.

Masochism is all the rage this season.

The networks sit atop the heap, all fat and sloe-eyed. They have nothing to do but inveigle the dollars from the wallets of a thousand assorted manufacturers, called sponsors. From shoe dye to hair dye, from cigarettes to baby bottles, from Mustangs to Modess they have to con the sponsors out of their bucks. And that means—supposedly—they have to present them with the most sparkling choices of new shows on which to present their goods. The big full/living/color bazaar, the marketplace, the display window. You would suppose this would put the sponsors in the catbird seat, but somehow, inexplicably, it doesn't work out that way. The networks con and flummox the sponsors into believing *they* know what the public wants. (That this is not only untrue, but insulting, finds verification in any one of the hundred pronunciamientos by network heads, conveying the message that the Viewer is a *schmuck* and will take whatever is thrown at him. Quality, they insist, is what people "want," what they tune in to watch, what gets the numbers. A self-fulfilling prophecy. Like something becoming fact merely because it's in print. Put it on TV and it *must* be good—after all, it *is* on TV, isn't it?) And with rare exceptions—such as the Xerox Corporation—the sponsor takes what he's offered.

So the networks predicate their operation not on service, but on profit. It isn't merely enough to serve the public by the manipulation of *our* airwaves, loaned to them for our pleasure, and to make a decent profit. Hell no, it has to be ten million more dollars profit per season than its nearest competitor.

And when you run a shop that big, on those terms, there's only one way to fly: the operable word is *safe*.

You play it safe all the way. You don't present new and daring ideas, because new and daring ideas generally tend to bug the Establishment, the folks out there in the Great American Heartland who want *laissez-faire* and *status quo*. You don't shake them up. If you shake them up, they won't buy all that nice pimple-remover and foamy beer. So you surfeit them with the most obvious, least demanding fare, that which will lull them and deaden them and turn their eyeballs into replicas of Little Orphan Annie's. Blank. The networks call it "least resistance programming."

To this end, the nets have their Continuity Departments, which send down several hundred thousand tons of interoffice memos yearly, chiefly concerned with not shaking up the scene. It is a pre-sell of fear that eliminates most of the honesty and originality before the scripts are even *written* because it is pre-censoring that occurs in the minds of the writers who will be going in on story-conferences with the producers, trying to get assignments.

They know they won't be able to explore any situations that smack of real life, so why should they expend effort and time and possible money in those directions. Have they done Lucy on a trampoline? No? Well, how's that for a story idea? Great. Let's do it. You've got an assignment.

It is the Orwellian police-state prethink that prevents a writer from using as common a word as *lunatic* in his script. I have seen network communiques to the effect that such a word *must not* appear in a script, for fear of offending someone. (Offending whom? The nuts in the asylums?)

The fear extends all down through the rickety structure. And the fear is implemented by the "ratings." The Nielsen is God. A totally specious and regularly fallible system (though in all fairness it is the only game in town) that says "Bonanza" is better fare than "East Side, West Side" that says Andy Griffith is more stimulating to more people than "Run For Your Life" that says "The Lucy Show" is infinitely better than "The Chrysler Theater." When was the last time you judged peaches and pears against rubber tires and aardvark hides?

In any other line of work it would be ludicrous, but year in and year out billion-dollar operations like ABC, NBC and CBS predicate

their schedules on this kind of lunacy. They compare comedy with drama, musicals with informational news programs. And the idiot shows come out on top, which is why we are bobbing about in a sea awash with flotsam and jetsam like “Gilligan’s Island,” “It’s About Time,” “Petticoat Junction,” “Green Acres,” “A Family Affair” and “Flipper.” (These would be acceptable, as relief, if we had a proportionately large number of serious dramatic or anthology shows, but with the demise of “The Chrysler Theater”—which was never really that controversial for openers—there is now a total absence of such shows.)

Because of the scramble for ratings, the networks keep the screws on the Network Liaison Men. These are a species of scurrying, furry creatures whose specific functions even *they* cannot name. They are memo-writers, nit-pickers, company finks, overseers, and general all-around *nuhdges*. They make sure the next level down, the Producers and Executive Producers make their shooting schedules with material that won’t unnerve anyone.

These schedules are predicated on the old saw that “the show must go on.” God forbid anyone should come in late on a shooting schedule, or ask how Humanity’s progress would be slowed or retarded if the show *didn’t* go on!

(It suddenly dawned on me, one day earlier this year, when I was close to exhaustion from having written a “Man From U.N.C.L.E.” around the clock for a week, in order to meet a deadline for shooting, that it was all a shuck! Look at it this way: say I don’t get my script in on time...say the worst thing imaginable happens...they miss their shooting date...the show doesn’t get filmed in six days...they’re late in dubbing and editing and scoring...the worst thing that would happen is that next Friday night, at 8:30 Pacific Standard Time, you would turn on your set and get one hour of recorded organ music. This is not what I would call putting a serious blockage in the aorta of Western Civilization.)

But to the terrified bunny rabbits in the studios and at the networks, this is a far greater tragedy than the assassination of Kennedy. Better the entire city of Des Moines should sink beneath the waves than that The Great Wad should click on its set and not be able to get its dose of pap, thus filling the Wad with sufficient feelings of gratitude so it will plunge out through lath and plaster in search of a living bra or something to clear its eight dribbling sinus cavities.

As a result of this omnipresent state of panic, and pushpushpush, the writer is compelled to write it quick, not good. “We don’t want it brilliant, we want it Thursday,” is the dictum so many TV writers live by.

And when they finally hand it in, what do they get: post-scripting

mayhem that makes the Sharpesville Massacre look like the Mad Tea Party. Script sabotage by men and women who would never think of telling a plumber how to thread the pipes, or a stonemason how to lay the bricks, but who feel they are competent enough to tell a writer—ostensibly an expert, a craftsman, an artist with a personal vision—how to tell the story. And when, in good conscience, the writer balks...they do it themselves. Clowns who are barely literate, men and women who have had training as advertising executives or sales personnel or traffic control chiefs...these fools have the audacity to tinker with creative efforts by artists whose pencil sharpeners they are not fit to tote.

It is an arena of such a high mortality rate, in terms of personal pride and creative instincts, that it drives writers of taste and talent either away from the medium entirely, or into the relative safety of the motion picture feature. No one who has talent, of even the most minuscule variety, stays in TV very long. They move on because the restrictions are killing. And thus, you have another reason why there is so much shit on the screens of America today. The good ones go away, and those hours of prime-time viewing need to be filled, with whatever capering or gibbering must be accepted, but *filled* nonetheless. So the hacks take over. They write fast, take their bread, and split. And another hour of garbage is shoveled out through your set.

It is a system so insane, so corrupt, that only *poseurs*, ex-actors or production executives lining their pockets with money from the script budget can hack it for any extended period.

(Rife with dichotomies—as Susskind would put it—the system encourages the delineation of controversial topics and outright brutality in its news shows [of the “White Paper” and “CBS Reports” ilk], but forbids it in dramatic presentations. Thus they cut the ground out from under the serious dramatist, who wishes to grapple with parlous times, its problems, and the world of reality.)

Thus, the writer, the lowest level of the Babel pyramid, lives every day with a gagging sense of helplessness. S/he is pre-conditioned and worn down in ways the networks and story editors and producers would not even admit exist. “The writers turn in lousy scripts, we have to save them,” they say. And sometimes they tell the truth. But it is a truth based on the fact that *they* have driven away the bright young creators, that *they* have made it a game no sane writer cares to play, that *they* have set it up so anyone who strives to excel feels like a fool. *They* have invited the hacks to flourish, and now they have the temerity to bitch about it.

The truth is simply that the entire concept of modern television is corrupt. Marshall McLuhan has said it: the medium is the message.

Massage, as in “worked-over.” Kneaded, like dough. They want to sell you, and they don’t give a damn what it takes on either side of that commercial to do it. If they can get away with a cheapie show like “Petticoat Junction” rather than a big-budget operation like “Cimarron Strip” (new this season), then so much the better for the coffers. And good writing or bad writing isn’t the question any longer.

It’s how much can they get away with?

Until the Mad Hatters and the March Hares of network television get some intensive shock therapy, jolting them back from their Cloud-Cuckoo-Land, the writers—for whom I speak—and you, the viewers—who are criminally silent—will wallow Adam’s Apple-deep in monkey vomit.

So eat heartily.

REVEALED AT LAST! WHAT KILLED THE DINOSAURS! AND YOU DON'T LOOK SO TERRIFIC YOURSELF

It's all about drinking strange wine.

It seems disjointed and jumps around like water on a griddle, but it all comes together, so be patient.

At 9:38 a.m. on July 15th, 1974, about eight minutes into "Suncoast Digest," a variety show on WXLTV in Sarasota, Florida, anchorwoman Chris Chubuck, 30, looked straight at the camera and said, "In keeping with Channel 40's policy of bringing you the latest in blood and guts in living color, you're going to see another first—an attempt at suicide."

Whereupon she pulled a gun out of a shopping bag and blew her brains out, on camera.

Paragraph 3, preceding, was taken verbatim from an article written by Daniel Schorr for *Rolling Stone*. I'd heard about the Chubuck incident, of course, and I admit to filching Mr. Schorr's sixty concise words because they *are* concise, and why should I try to improve on precision? As the artist Mark Rothko once put it: "Silence is so accurate."

Further, Mr. Schorr perceived in the bizarre death of Chris Chubuck exactly what I got out of it when I heard the news broadcast the day it happened. She was making a statement about television...*on television!*

The art-imitating-life resemblance to Paddy Chayefsky's film *Network* should not escape us. I'm sure it wouldn't have escaped Chris Chubuck's attention. Obvious cliché; onward.

I used to know Dan Blocker, who played Hoss Cartwright on "Bonanza." He was a wise and a kind man, and there are tens of dozens of people I would much rather see dead than Dan. One time, around lunch-break at Paramount, when I was goofing off on writing a treatment for a Joe Levine film that never got made, and Dan was resting his ass from some dumb horsey number he'd been reshooting all morning, we sat on the steps of the weathered saloon that probably in no way resembled any saloon that had ever existed in Virginia City, Nevada, and we talked about reality versus fantasy. The reality of getting up at five in the morning to get to the studio in time for makeup call and the reality of how bloody much FICA tax they took out of our paychecks and the reality of one of his kids being down with something or other...and the fantasy of not being Dan Blocker,

but of being Hoss Cartwright.

And he told me a scary story. He laughed about it, but it was the laugh of butchers in a slaughterhouse who have to swing the mauls that brain the beeves; who then go home to wash the stink out of their hair from the spattering.

He told me—and he said this happened *all* the time, not just in isolated cases—that he had been approached by a little old woman during one of his personal appearances at a rodeo, and the woman had said to him, dead seriously, “Now listen to me, Hoss: when you go home tonight, I want you to tell your daddy, Ben, to get rid of that Chineese fella who cooks for you all. What you need is to get yourself a good woman in there can cook up some decent food for you and your family.”

So Dan said to her, very politely (because he was one of the most courteous people I’ve ever met), “Excuse me, ma’am, but my name is Dan Blocker. Hoss is just the character I play. When I go home I’ll be going to my house in Los Angeles and my wife and children will be waiting.”

And she went right on, just a bit affronted because she *knew* all that, what was the matter with him, did he think she was simple or something, “Yes, I know...but when you go back to the Ponderosa, you just tell your daddy Ben that I said...”

For her, fantasy and reality were one and the same.

There was a woman who had the part of a home-wrecker on a daytime soap opera. One day as she was coming out of Lord & Taylor in New York, a viewer began bashing her with an umbrella, calling her filthy names and insisting she should leave that nice man and his wife alone!

One time during a college lecture, I idly mentioned that I had actually *thought up* all the words Leonard Nimoy had spoken as Mr. Spock on the sole “Star Trek” segment I had written; and a young man leaped up in the audience, in tears, and began screaming that I was a liar. He actually thought the actors were living those roles as they came across the tube.

Why do I tell you all this; and what does it have to do with drinking strange wine?

Chris Chubbuck perceived at a gut level that for too many Americans the only reality is what’s on the box. That Johnny Carson and Don Rickles and Mary Tyler Moore are more real, more substantial, more immediately important than the members of their own family, or the people in their community. She knew that her death wouldn’t be *real* unless it happened on television, unless it took place where life is lived, there in phosphor-dot Never-Never Land. If

she did it decently, in the privacy of her home, or in some late night bar, or in a deserted parking lot...it would never have happened. She would have been flensed from memory as casually as a popped pimple. Her suicide on camera was the supreme act of loathing and ridicule for the monkeymass that watched her.

When I was writing my television criticism for the Los Angeles *Free Press*, circa 1968-1972, I used *The Glass Teat* columns to repeat my belief that those of us who cared, who had some ethics and some talent, dared not abandon to the Visigoths what was potentially the most powerful medium the world had ever known for the dissemination of education and knowledge. I truly believed that. And I said it again and again.

But it's been five years since I last wrote those words, and I've done so many college speaking engagements that Grand Forks, North Dakota, has blurred with Minneapolis, Minnesota, has blurred with Bethel, Maine, has blurred with Shreveport, Louisiana, and what I've come away with is a growing horror at what television has done to us.

I now believe that television itself, the medium of sitting in front of a magic box that pulses images at us endlessly, the act of watching TV, per se, is mind crushing. It is soul deadening, dehumanizing, soporific in a poisonous way, ultimately brutalizing. It is, simply put so you cannot mistake my meaning, *a bad thing*.

We need never fear Orwell's 1984, because it's here, with us now, nearly a decade ahead of schedule, and has been with us for quite a while already. Witness the power of television and the impact it has had on *you*.

Don't write me letters telling me, how *you've* escaped the terror, how *you're* not a slave to the box, how *you* still read and listen to Brahms and carry on meaningful discussions with your equally liberated friends. Stop and *really* take stock of how many hours last week you sat stunned before the tube, relaxing, just unwinding, just passing a little time between the demanding and excoriating life-interests that *really* command your energies. You will be stunned again, if you are honest. Because *I* did it, and it scared me, genuinely put a fright into me. It was far more time than I'd have considered feasible, knowing how much I despise television and how little there is I care to watch.

I rise, usually, between five and seven in the morning, depending how late I've worked the night before. I work like a lunatic all day... I'm a workaholic...pity me...and by five or six in the evening I have to unwind. So I lie down and turn on the set. Where before I might have picked up a book of light fiction, or dozed, or just sighed and stared at the ceiling, now I turn on the carnivorous coaxial creature.

And I watch.

Here in Los Angeles between five and eight, when “Prime Time” begins (oh, how I love that semantically twisted phrase) we have the same drivel you have in your city. Time that was taken from the networks to program material of local interest and edification. Like reruns of “Adam-12,” “The Price Is Right,” “The Joker’s Wild,” “Name That Tune,” “I Dream of Jeannie,” “Bewitched,” “Concentration,” and “Match Game P.M.” I lie there like the quadruple amputee viewpoint character of Dalton Trumbo’s *Johnny Got His Gun*, never speaking, breathing shallowly, seeing only what flashes before my eyes, reduced to a ganglial image receptor, a raw nerve-end taking in whatever banalities and incredible stupidities they care to throw at me in the name of “giving the audience what they want.”

If functional illiterates failing such mind-challenging questions as “What was the name of the character Robert Stack played on ‘The Untouchables’?” is an accurate representation of “what the audience wants,” then my point has been solidly made...

...and it goes directly to the answer to the question of what killed the dinosaurs and you don’t look so terrific yourself!

But I wander. So. I lie there, until my low bullshit threshold is reached, either through the zombie mannerisms of the “Adam-12” cops—dehumanized paragons of a virtue never known by L.A.’s former lunatic chief of police, Weirdo Ed Davis—or because of some yotz on *The Price Is Right* having an orgasm at winning a thirty-year supply of rectal suppositories. And then I curse, snap off the set, and realize I’ve been lying there for ninety minutes.

And when I take stock of how much time I’m spending in front of that set, either at the five-to-eight break or around eleven o’clock when I fall into bed for another break and turn on “The CBS Late Movie,” I become aware of five hours spent in mindless sucking at the glass teat.

If you’re honest, you’ll own up to that much time televiewing, too. Maybe more. Maybe a little less. But you spend from three to eight hours a day at it. And you’re not alone. Nor am I. The college gigs I do have clearly demonstrated that to me. Clearly. I take show-of-hands polls in the audience; and after badgering them to cop to the truth, the vast bulk of the audience admits it, and I see the stunned looks of concern and dawning awareness.

They never realized it was that much; nor did I.

And the effect it has had on them, on you, young people and old alike; black and white and Hispanic and Oriental and Amerind; male and female; wealthy and impoverished; WASPs and Jews and Shintoists and Buddhists and Catholics and even Scientologists. All of us, all of you, swamped day after day by stereotypes and jingoism and “accepted” life-styles. So that after a while you come to believe

doctors are all wise and noble and one with Marcus Welby and they could cure you of *anything* if only you'd stop being so cranky and irrational; that cops never abuse their power and are somehow Solomonic in their judgments; that, in the final extreme, violence—as represented by that eloquent vocabulary of a punch in the mouth—solves problems; that women are either cute and cuddly and need a strong hand to keep them in line or defeminize themselves if they have successful careers; and that eating McDonald's prefab food is actually *better* for you than *foie de veau saute aux fines herbes*...and tastier, too.

I see this zombiatic response in college audiences. It manifests itself most prominently in the kinds of questions that are asked. Here I stand before them, perhaps neither Melville nor Twain, but nonetheless a man with a substantial body of work behind him, books that express the artist's view of the world (and after all, isn't that why they paid me two grand or better a night to come and speak? Surely it can't be my winsome manner!), and they persist in asking me what it was like to work on "Star Trek" or what Jimmy Caan is *really* like and why did Tom Snyder keep cutting me off on the "Tomorrow" show. I get angry with them. I make myself lots less antic and entertaining. I tell them what I'm telling you here. And they don't like me for it. As long as I'm running down the military-industrial complex or the fat money cats who play sneaky panther games with our lives, they give me many "Right on, brother!" ovations. But when I tell them how shallow and programmed television is making them, there is a clear lynch tenor in the mob. (It isn't just college kids, gentle reader. I was recently rewarded with sullen animosity when I spoke to a dinner gathering of Southern California Book Publicists, and instead of blowing smoke up their asses about what a wonderful thing book publicity through the Johnny Carson show is—because there isn't one of them who wouldn't sacrifice several quarts of blood to get a client on that detestable viewing ground for banal conversationalists—I quoted them the recent illiteracy figures released by HEW. I pointed out that only 8% of the 220,000,000 population of this country buy books, and of that 8% only 2% buy more than a single book a year. I pointed out that 6% of that measly 8% were no doubt buying, as their single enriching literary experience each year, *Jaws* or *Oliver's Story* or the latest Harold Robbins ghastliness, rather than, say, *Remembrance of Things Past* or the Durants' *The Lessons of History* or even the latest Nabokov or Lessing novel. So that meant they were hustling books to only 2% of the population of this country; while the other 98% sank deeper and deeper into illiteracy and functional illiteracy, their heads being shoved under by the pressure of television, to which they were slavishly making obeisance. They were, in effect, sharpening the blade

for their executioner, assisting in their own extinction. They *really* didn't want to hear that. Nor do college audiences.)

A *bad* thing. Watching television. Not rationalizing it so that it comes out reading thus: "Television is *potentially* a good thing; it can educate and stimulate and inform us; we've just permitted it to be badly used; but if we could get some *good* stuff on the tube..." No, I'm afraid I've gone beyond that rationalization, to an extreme position. The *act* of watching television for protracted periods (and there's no way to insure the narcotic effects won't take you over) is deleterious to the human animal. The medium itself insists you sit there quietly and cease thinking.

The dinosaurs. How they died.

Television, quite the opposite of books or even old-time radio that presented drama and comedy and talk shows (unlike Top Forty radio programming today, which is merely TV without moving parts), is systematically oriented toward stunning the use of individual imagination. It puts everything out there, *right there*, so you don't have to dream even a little bit. When they would broadcast a segment of, say, "Inner Sanctum" in the Forties, and you heard the creaking door of a haunted house, the mind was forced to *create the picture* of that haunted house—a terrifying place so detailed and terrifying that if Universal Studios wanted to build such an edifice for a TV movie, it would cost them millions of dollars and it *still* would be one one-millionth as frightening as the one your own imagination had cobbled up.

A book is a participatory adventure. It involves a creative act at its inception and a creative act when its purpose is fulfilled. The writer dreams the dream and sets it down; the reader reinterprets the dream in personal terms, with personal vision, when he or she reads it. Each creates a world. The template is the book.

At risk of repeating myself, and of once again cribbing from another writer's perfection of expression (in this case, my friend Dr. Isaac Asimov), here is a bit I wrote on this subject for an essay on the "craft" of writing teleplays:

Unlike television, films, football games, the roller derby, wars in underdeveloped nations and Watergate hearings, which are spectator sports, a book requires the activation of its words by the eyes and the intellect of a reader. As Isaac Asimov said recently in an article postulating the perfect entertainment cassette, "A cassette as ordinarily viewed makes sound and casts light. That is its purpose, of course, but must sound and light obtrude on others who are not involved or interested? The ideal cassette would be visible and audible only to the person using it.... We could imagine a cassette that is always in perfect adjustment; that starts automatically when you look

at it; that stops automatically when you cease to look at it; that can play forward or backward, quickly or slowly, by skips or with repetitions, entirely at your pleasure.... Surely that's the ultimate dream device—a cassette that may deal with any of an infinite number of subjects, fictional or non-fictional, that is self-contained, portable, non-energy-consuming, perfectly private and largely under the control of the will.... Must this remain only a dream? Can we expect to have such a cassette some day?... We not only have it now, we have had it for many centuries. The ideal I have described is the printed word, the book, the object you now hold—light, private, and manipulable at will.... Does it seem to you that the book, unlike the cassette I have been describing, does not produce sound and images? It certainly does.... You cannot read without hearing the words in your mind and seeing the images to which they give rise. In fact, they are *your* sounds and images, not those invented for you by others, and are therefore better.... The printed word presents minimum information, however. Everything but that minimum must be provided by the reader—the intonation of words, the expressions on faces, the actions, the scenery, the background, must all be drawn out of that long line of black-on-white symbols.”

Quite clearly, if one but looks around to assess the irrefutable evidence of reality, books strengthen the dreaming facility, and television numbs it. Atrophy soon follows.

Shelley Torgeson, who is the director of the spoken word records I've cut for Alternate World Recordings, is also a mass media teacher at Harrison High School in Westchester. She tells me some things that buttress my position.

1) A fifteen-year-old student summarily rejected the reading of books because it “wasn't real.” Because it was your imagination, and your imagination isn't real. So Shelley asked her what was “real” and the student responded instantly, “Television.” Because you could see it. Then, by pressing the conversation, Shelley discovered that though the student was in the tenth grade, when she read she didn't understand the words and was *making up* words and their meanings all through the text—far beyond the usual practice, in which we all indulge, of gleaning an *approximate* meaning of an unfamiliar word from its context. With television, she had no such problems. They didn't use words. It was real. Thus—and quite logically in a kind of Alice-down-the-rabbit-hole manner—the books *weren't* real, because she was making them up as she went along, not actually reading them. If you know what I mean.

2) An important school function was woefully underattended one night, and the next day Shelley (suspecting the reason) confirmed that the absence of so many students was due to their being at home

watching part two of the TV movie based on the Manson murder spree, *Helter Skelter*. Well, that was a bit of a special event in itself, and a terrifying program; but the interesting aspect of their watching the show emerged when a student responded to Shelley's comparison of watching something that "wasn't real" with a living event that "was real." The student contended it was real, he had seen it. No, Shelley insisted, it wasn't real, it was just a show. Hell no, the kid kept saying, it was real: he had *seen* it. Reasoning slowly and steadily, it took Shelley fifteen or twenty minutes to convince him (if she actually managed) that he had not seen a real thing, because he had not been in Los Angeles in August of 1969 when the murders had happened. Though he was seventeen years old, the student was incapable of perceiving, *unaided*, the difference between a dramatization and real life.

3) In each classroom of another school at which Shelley taught, there was a TV set, mostly unused save for an occasional administrative announcement; the sets had been originally installed in conjunction with a Ford Foundation grant to be used for visual training. Now they're blank and silent. When Shelley had trouble controlling the class, getting them quiet, she would turn on the set and they would settle down. The screen contained nothing, just snow; but they grew as fascinated as cobras at a mongoose rally, and fell silent, watching nothing. Shelley says she could keep them that way for extended periods.

Interestingly, as a footnote, when Shelley mentioned this device at lunch, a chemistry professor said he used something similar. When his students were unruly he would place a beaker of water on a Bunsen burner. When the water began to boil, the students grew silent and mesmerized, watching the water bubbling.

And as a subfootnote, I'm reminded of a news story I read. A burglar broke into a suburban home in Detroit or some similar city (it's been a while since I read the item and unimportant details have blurred in my mind) and proceeded to terrorize and rob the housewife alone there with her seven-year-old son. As the attacker stripped the clothes off the woman at knife point, the child wandered into the room. The burglar told the child to go in the bedroom and watch television till he was told to come out. The child watched the tube for six straight hours, never once returning to the room where his mother had been raped repeatedly, tied and bound to a chair with tape over her mouth, and beaten mercilessly. The burglar had had free access to the entire home, had stripped it of all valuables, and had left unimpeded. The tape, incidentally, had been added when the burglar/rapist was done enjoying himself. All through the assault the woman had been calling for help. But the child had been watching the set and

didn't come out to see what was happening. For six hours.

Roy Torgeson, Shelley's husband and producer of my records, reminded us of a classroom experiment reported by the novelist Jerzy Kosinski, in which a teacher was set to speaking at one side of the front of a classroom, and a television monitor was set up on the other side of the room, showing the teacher speaking. The students had unobstructed vision of both. They watched the monitor. They watched what was real.

Tom Snyder, of the NBC "Tomorrow" show, was telling me that he receives letters from people apologizing for their having gone away on vacation or visiting with their grandchildren, or otherwise not having been at home so he could do his show—but now that they're back, and the set is on, he can start doing his show again. Their delusion is a strange reversal of the ones I've noted previously. For them, Snyder (and by extension other newscasters and actors) aren't there, aren't happening, unless *they* are watching. They think the actors can see into *their* living rooms, and they dress as if for company, they always make sure the room is clean, and in one case there is a report of an elderly woman who dresses for luncheon with "her friends" and sets up the table and prepares luncheon and then, at one o'clock, turns on the set for a soap opera. Those are her friends: she thinks they can see into her house, and she is one with them in their problems.

To those of us who conceive of ourselves as rational and grounded in reality (yes, friends, even though I write fantasy, I live in the real world, my feet sunk to the ankles in pragmatism), all of this may seem like isolated, delusionary behavior. I assure you it isn't. A study group that rates high school populations recently advised one large school district that the "good behavior" of the kids in its classes was very likely something more than just normal quiet and good manners. They were *too* quiet, *too* tranquilized, and the study group called it "dangerous." I submit that the endless watching of TV by kids produces this blank, dead, unimaginative manner.

It is widespread, and cannot possibly be countered by the minimal level of reading that currently exists in this country. Young people have been systematically bastardized in their ability to seek out quality material—books, films, food, life-styles, life-goals, enriching relationships.

Books cannot combat the spiderwebbing effect of television because kids simply cannot read. It is on a par with their inability to hear music that isn't rock. Turn the car radio dial from one end to another when you're riding with young people (up to the age of fifty) and you will perceive that they whip past classical music as if it were "white noise," simply static to their ears. The same goes for books.

The printed word has no value to them and carries no possibility of knowledge or message that relates to *their* real world.

If one chooses to say, as one idiot I faced on the *90 Minutes Live* talk show over the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation said, that people don't need to read, that people don't like books, that they want to be "entertained" (as if reading were something hideous, something other than *also* entertainment), then we come to an impasse. But if, like me, you believe that books preserve the past, illuminate the present, and point the way to the future...then you can understand why I seem to be upset at the ramifications of this epiphany I've had.

Do not expect—as I once did because I saw Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin unmasked on television—that TV will reveal the culprits. Nixon lied without even the faintest sign of embarrassment or disingenuousness on TV, time after time, for years. He told lies, flat out and outrageously; monstrous lies that bore no relation to the truth. But well over half the population of this country, tuning him in, believed him. Not just that they *wanted* to believe him for political or personal reasons, or because it was easier than having waves made...they believed him because he stared right at them and spoke softly and they could *tell* he was telling the truth. TV did not unmask him. Television played no part in the revelations of Watergate. In point of fact, television prevented the unmasking, because Nixon used TV to keep public opinion tremblingly on his side. It was only when the real world, the irrefutable facts, were slammed home again and again, that the hold was loosened on public sentiment.

Nor did television show what a bumbler Gerald Ford was. He was as chummy and friendly and familiar as Andy Griffith or Captain Kangaroo when he came before us on the tube. Television does not show us the duplicitous smirk, the dull mentality, the self-serving truth behind the noncommittal statement of administration policy. It does not deal in reality, it does not proffer honesty, it only serves up nonjudgmental images and allows thugs like Nixon to make themselves as acceptable as Reverend Ike.

And on the Johnny Carson show they have a seven-minute "author's spot," gouged out of ninety minutes festooned with Charo's quivering buttocks, Zsa Zsa Gabor's feeling about fiscal responsibility, John Davidson on recombinant DNA, and Don Rickles insulting Carson's tie. Then, in the last ten minutes they invite on Carl Sagan or Buckminster Fuller or John Lilly to explain the Ethical Structure of the Universe. And they contend this is a rebirth of the art of conversation. Authors of books are seldom invited on the show unless they have a new diet, a new sex theory, or a nonfiction gimmick that will make an interesting demonstration in which Johnny can take part—like

wrestling a puma, spinning a hula hoop, or baking lasagna with solar heat.

All this programs the death of reading.

And reading is the drinking of strange wine.

Like water on a hot griddle, I have bounced around, but the unification of the thesis is at hand.

Drinking strange wine pours strength into the imagination.

The dinosaurs had no strange wine.

They had no imagination. They lived 130,000,000 years and vanished. Why? Because they had no imagination. Unlike human beings who have it and use it and build their future rather than merely passing through their lives as if they were spectators. Spectators watching television, one might say.

The saurians had no strange wine, no imagination, and they became extinct. And you don't look so terrific yourself.

EPIPHANY

Working in television—to appropriate the words of the late sports-writer Jimmy Cannon on boxing—“is a filthy enterprise and if you stay in it long enough your mind will become a concert hall where Chinese music never stops playing.”

All unknowing, innocent as the heroine of a Barbara Cartland Regency romance (at least for the first fifteen pages before the initial bodice-ripping), I came to Hollywood in 1962 with a few published books to my credit and the ingenuous naivete that led me to believe that merely by being the best writer the medium had ever seen, I could raise the level of what went out across the coaxial cable.

Nine years and two months later, on Wednesday, March 10th, 1971, ABC-TV aired the last script I was to write for ten years, an emasculated segment of the short-lived series “The Young Lawyers.” After nine years and two months, and several dozen teleplays; after having won the Writers Guild award for Most Outstanding Teleplay three times (the first writer ever to win three times and the only one till Christopher Knopf tied that record ten years later); after having the dream of elevating the medium revealed as the sophomoric delusion of one who simply does not recognize the juggernaut because it’s festooned with bright ribbons, I understood the application of Cannon’s words. And I perceived what the late Charles Beaumont—best known for his “Twilight Zone” scripts—meant when he told me, on my first night in Hollywood, as we shot pool in a joint in the San Fernando Valley, “Achieving success in television is like climbing an enormous mountain of cow flop so you can pluck one perfect rose from the top; and you find, after you’ve made that hideous ascent, that you’ve lost the sense of smell.”†

On March 10th, 1971 I packed it in. I swore I would never again write for television. Life was too short, and the time allotted a writer too precious to waste on an industry whose loftiest ambitions were returning Bob Denver to Gilligan’s Island or tugging its forelock in an effort not to offend the intellectual paraplegics of The Moral Majority.

When a writer embraces aloneness for as long as it takes to set down a book, or a story, or even an essay like this, what remains when he returns to the state of coagulated smoke from which Paracelsus contended it originated, is *real*. It can be held in the hands and reread, for better or worse, a thousand times, at leisure. The thoughts can run as deep as one might wish.

When a television show has been aired, all that is left is air. Dead air. And the rapidly vanishing Doppler effect of what might have been a subtextual message under the transient action. For ten years I have inveighed against television and its dead certain effect on the intellect of not only America, but the world. I have expended hundreds of hours in printed interviews, on lecture platforms and (horribly, ironically) in that most potent of forums, the television talk-show, urging—as did the late Paddy Chayevsky’s Howard Beale—that we turn off the sets and go back to a non-alpha state wherein the reading of books might save the immortal soul and intellect.

Invariably, I was pilloried for my holier-than-thou model of rectitude and unsullied ethic. In college audiences the blank stares of those who had been stunned into somnolence by the five thousandth rerun of “Star Trek” were justified by vocal antagonists who called me a cop-out for “deserting the battle” (their phrase). I told them it wasn’t my battle, I was not out there to sop up the bullets for them; I was not about to waste my abilities pursuing a holy grail that was little better than a Dixie cup full of Dr. Pepper. And in those audiences that were filled with men and women who would stand by as books were pulled off library shelves and burned by self-appointed guardians of public morality, without a shriek being uttered; who would be on the steps of City Hall with flambeaux and pitchforks were they to be denied their *General Hospital* or *Family Feud*; in those audiences I correctly saw ready candidates for the dance of the doomed species. And I was saddened.

Now, ten years after renouncing the filthy practice, I have succumbed once more. I have written my first script in a decade. I have adapted one of my short stories for the new “Darkroom” series. It all comes full circle; the show is on ABC.

One of my five or six best friends, who also writes for television, thinks I am a hypocrite. He does not pillory me for writing this script; he knows and loves me, and so assumes I have my reasons. He’s right. I do have my reasons. Even so, he feels my self-righteous stance all these years makes this a crime of monumental proportions. The fall from grace for one who aspired to purity is always more enlightening than just one more sellout by him or her who had no ethics to begin with.

Yet if my reasons have driven me to write this wonderful script you will no doubt admire outrageously, the title of which is “Killing Bernstein,”† and if my fall from rectitude is so onerous, then the best I can hope for is that some of you will slip a tape into the VCR and capture that forty-eight minutes demonstrating my Feet of Clay when it is aired one of these Friday nights. At least it’ll be a *semblance* of preservation.

Because if anything led me back into the evil of my former ways it was succumbing to the lure of videotaping; the ready access of moments when Bogart and old Walter Huston were told by Alfonso Bedoya that he didn't have to show them no stinkin' badges; when Donald O'Connor danced up a wall as Gene Kelly watched in awe; when Ronald Colman said it was a far better thing he did than he had ever done before; when Tyrone Power carved his first Z in an adobe wall; when Robert Armstrong sagely noted that it was beauty killed the beast.

Like you, I am a sucker for technology, as I am a sucker for myths. Myths named Gary Cooper and Marta Toren and Jimmy Cagney and even Jack Webb as Pete Kelly. And myths like writing so well that you can drag the zombies back from their deadly dance of the doomed species.

And that's how Joan of Arc got an all-over hotfoot.

ROLLING DAT OLE DEBBIL ELECTRONIC STONE

What follows has been called by some—even those whose interests are ill-served by Harlan's conclusions—the definitive statement on videogames. It was written in 1982 on assignment for Video Review magazine and is followed by an epilog which accompanied its reprint in the October 1983 issue of The Comics Journal.

Nothing in this world beyond the first sixteen seconds of a baby's birth is innocent. Nothing is precisely what it seems to be. Anything can be a paradigm of life's important lessons.

Parker Brothers's new Video Game Cartridge—"Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back"—seems, at first encounter, merely another of the seemingly endless permutations of the callus-producing rage that has swept an entire generation of Orphan Annie-eyed, overfinanced, leisuretime-surfeited teenagers into electronic game arcades from Tampa to Tacoma.

But even the botulism bacterium looks innocent at first encounter. And "The Empire Strikes Back" videogame is an analogue for the Myth of Sisyphus.

Never having played a videogame, having stared with creeping horror at the legions of silent, intense kids mesmerized in front of Pac-Man, Space Invaders and Donkey Kong machines in Chuck E. Cheese pizza & videogame parlors, I greeted the request to review this new cartridge with mixed emotions ranging from fearful curiosity to outright dismay.

I had no reason to think this fad was any more dangerous than swallowing goldfish, phone booth-stuffing, Hula Hoops or wearing one's hair in imitation of Farrah Fawcett. Yet the vast amounts of money being poured into these games, the accumulated years of time lost playing them, the apparent absence of any benefit to the players, had produced in me a *frisson* of concern. In a nation where reading is becoming an arcane lost art, where television has become the universal curriculum, where the lemminglike pursuit of mindless "entertainment" has taken on the noble obsessiveness of a search for the Holy Grail, the inspired exploitation of the *Star Wars* totem in videogame form could emerge as the most virulent electronic botulism of them all.

The Atari console system was rigged to a television set in my home, I read the simple instruction brochure, and proceeded to bore

my ass off for the next hour becoming as adept at “The Empire Strikes Back” as I cared to be.

(Kindly refrain from *kvetching* that a ten-year-old can become more proficient at one of these twiddles than I, an adult at least in years, could ever be. Yes, he or she very likely *can* beat me ninety-nine out of a hundred times; but no ten-year-old I’ve ever encountered can write *Moby Dick*, create a Sistine Chapel fresco or fuck with any degree of expertise. And none of those are taught by videogame).

The extremely simple-minded parameters of Parker Brothers’s “Empire Strikes Back” are consistent with virtually all other videogames. Destruction is the object. A line of two-dimensional Imperial Walkers plod toward a Rebel power generator on the Ice Planet Hoth (if you can believe those mundane pastel readouts represent an Ice Planet). You, as player, have to blow them up with blasts from the five Snowspeeder aircraft you are given. The “object” of the game is to destroy as many of the Walkers as you can (it takes 48 direct hits to neutralize a Walker) before they reach the power generator and blow up the entire planet. Terrific object-lesson for kids to learn; invaluable for everyday life in a world where Nuclear Holocaust paranoia already immobilizes us.

The Walkers fire missiles at the Snowspeeders. They can track the zipping aircraft, fire “smart bombs” that loop and follow a Snowspeeder, blast fore and aft of themselves, and otherwise cause you aggravation. Occasionally a “bomb hatch” will open—as indicated by a minuscule dot of light that strobes too briefly for anyone to hit—save someone who has devoted his or her life to playing this game—and the Walker is off’d at once. Your Snowspeeders can be repaired and go back into action, but only twice. If you knock out a Walker, another one appears. Smarter, stronger, with new abilities. Points are amassed for various degrees of destruction to the Walkers; and for every 2000 points scored, you get an extra Snowspeeder.

There’s a lot more hurly-burly. Walkers change color and are weakened as a result of amassed hits, you can crash your Snowspeeder into a Walker, sometimes you acquire The Force and cannot be destroyed...32 variations of one-and two-player games.

But here’s the bottom line, quoted directly from the rules brochure: “END OF THE GAME: The game ends when the lead Imperial Walker reaches the power generator—or—when the last of your Snowspeeders is destroyed.”

In other words, you cannot win.

The game ends when you lose.

It may take you ten minutes or fifteen years. The level of your expertise may grow to be one so elevated that the game will have to be concluded by your grandchildren, but...YOU CANNOT WIN!

In classical Greek mythology we find the familiar legend of Sisyphus, founder and king of Corinth who, because of his avarice and fraudulence, was condemned to the lower world, eternally to roll a great stone to the top of a steep hill, whence it always rolled down to the bottom again. This ghastly punishment, perceived through the ages as a paradigm for the worst eternal fate that could be visited on an errant mortal, is spoken of thus in *Webster's Dictionary of Proper Names*:

"Hence, a Sisyphian task, an unending task on which immense energy is expended with little to show for it."

Hence, playing Parker Brothers's "The Empire Strikes Back" videogame.

An unending task on which immense energy and great gobs of money are expended with little to show for it.

To be played by urchins incapable of reading a book, parsing a sentence, thinking an original thought; rationalized as valuable in establishing eye-to-hand coordination even if it's a coordination so specialized it won't help you sink an eight-ball in the hip pocket; costing, with its cheap and sluggish joystick console, enough to buy a good set of the collected works of Mark Twain; fostering a solitude of activity that separates the player even more from the real world; this latest icon of the Imbecile Industry is a pointless, time-wasting enterprise that can instill only one dreadful life-lesson in those of a youthful intelligence who play it.

And the lesson is the lesson of Sisyphus. You cannot win. You can only waste your life struggling and struggling, getting as good as you can be, with no hope of triumph. As one with governments in power, the chief reason for the existence of this game is to *stay* in power. To keep you playing. Over and over and over, rolling that great rock up the hill, killing Walkers, only to have the rock roll down on you again, only to have faster, cleverer, more destructive Walkers come to life on the screen. And you play, and you play, and in the twilight you find the cobwebs have smothered your imagination, your leg has gone to sleep, your money is gone, your friends have grown up and achieved immortality and died; and you are all alone there in the gloaming, with the radiant screen and its two-dimensional electronic death-machines...firing, firing...lumbering...making no progress, winning no awards, enriching life not one whit.

But does it really matter? Clearly not. Because life—as viewed by this and other videogame Body Snatchers—is a pitiless congeries of rocks being rolled up a steep hill, only to fall back. This is the lesson one learns from Parker Brothers and their shamelessly exploitative little toy. Unless one has the presence of self to become rapidly bored.

What a helluva recommendation: the best one can hope for is that

one yawns before one's soul is snatched.

POSTSCRIPT

What you have just read was my first and last encounter with videogames. It was altered and presented in an unauthorized manner by the editors of *Video Review*, one of the leading magazines in the industry, who had commissioned it. (For those who may feel *Video Review* acted courageously in soliciting the writing of one whom they knew would probably disaffect their prime advertisers, not to mention their drone readership, be advised that the commission was tendered by one of their junior editors, a fan of my books, who caught sheer hell from the publisher. Parker Bros. did, however, pull its advertising from the magazine.)

Subsequent to its publication, I got a call from the office of the President of Atari in Sunnyvale, California. He wanted a copy of the original manuscript to frame on his wall, having seen a framed copy in the office of Dr. Alan C. Kay, Atari's chief scientist.

That was the first I knew of the amazing ripple effect my humble efforts were causing. Apparently the essay was the first dissenting piece ever published in the videogame community, and the screams were loud and long.

Within a month, the number one magazine in the industry, *Video Magazine*, featured an editorial by Bruce Apar, its head honcho, lambasting anyone and everyone who dared to suggest that videogames might not presage The Second Coming or some other portent of Utopia. It was titled "Video-game Critics & Cranks." And though it lashed out to all points of the compass in hopes of striking a target, the big blast was reserved for your self-effacing columnist as follows:

"Adding to the strident rant of these cockeyed pessimists [Mr. Apar wrote] are irresponsible periodicals, one of which recently ran a review of a new game that insulted readers' intelligence by virtually ignoring the game. This so-called review was in truth a diatribe against all video games and people who play them. The writer, who freely admitted to never playing a video game before, was operating on that familiar premise, 'If I don't like it, it's bad for everybody.'"

Well, imagine my pleasure at discovering the behemoth was capable of a bleat now and then! Further enhanced by information that reached me later, the content of which was that Apar and his magazine had commiserated with Parker Bros. to the extent of telling their advertising department that *Video Review* was a nest of Bad Guys, and that they should convert all their advertising bucks spent with the magazine that had published such a dreadful bit of heresy...to the righteous venue of *Video Magazine*.

I wrote a letter to Mr. Apar. Here is most of it:

Dear Mr. Apar:

Though referenced blind in your recent editorial, I suspect the name on the letterhead above will strike a familiar note.

One of your readers, recognizing the referent, sent along a Xerox copy for my attention, with the words, "Looks as if you pinked the bull." It would seem so.

I was advised, when I wrote the piece for *Video Review* (at their behest, and with considerable reluctance on my part), that it was the first dissenting view of videogames to be published in magazines whose vested interest is, of course, to keep as many kids goggle-eyed in front of Donkey Kong and Missile Command as possible. And was further advised that it would bring forth the apologists for the industry in force.

They were correct in their estimation, of course. Your sally is estimably off-the-point and no defense of what I wrote from observation in the Real World seems required. The studies are beginning to be published on the effects of videogames on kids, so I take your umbrage as similar to that of the tobacco industry when it's suggested that cigarettes might not be good for people. But if you're going to rebut your critics, I suggest that you find other grounds than that a reviewer had never before played such games. For that was *precisely* the reason I was chosen to write the review (apart from my literary and critical credentials, which even *Video* would have difficulty assailing). I had no preconceived opinions, and was ready to deal on the square.

It's a shame *Video*, and you, don't have such a lack of self-service. My, you do get upset when someone suggests the Emperor ain't got no clothes, don't you?

Never received a reply. Didn't expect to. Just felt like sticking it to him. Keeps balance in the universe.

But little more than two weeks later, on November 10th, 1982, front page headlines all over America announced:

U.S. SURGEON GENERAL C. EVERETT KOOP SAID TUESDAY THAT VIDEO GAMES MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO THE HEALTH OF YOUNG PEOPLE, WHO HE SAID ARE BECOMING ADDICTED TO THE MACHINES. "THEY ARE INTO IT BODY AND SOUL," KOOP SAID.

Naturally, I wrote a follow-up letter to Mr. Apar, the gist of which

was: "Posterity seems determined to have its say rather more quickly than usual on this disagreement between our positions. How many 'cranks' does it take to make a consensus?"

He didn't respond to that one, either. Thank god I handle rejection with equanimity.

I could not, in my most power-drenched fantasies, have postulated how speedily posterity was bearing down on the videogame Eden and all its leech apologists. I like to think I have a cultivated talent for helping to redress the balance in the universe, but not even Zorro had the power to decimate an entire multi-billion-dollar industry so quickly. On two days in the following month, December 1982, Warner Communications, Inc. (parent company of Atari, Inc., as well as of DC comics) watched its stock plummet 45% as Atari went into the toilet.

Atari, whose revenues were nibbling at the edges of \$2 billion a year, with 10,000 employees in fifty buildings all across Silicon Valley, announced on December 8th that they had been hit by massive order cancellations, and in the next two days (as reported by the *Wall Street Journal*) stockholders lost a collective \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion on paper. Soon after there were rumors of insider trading, rumors that certain Warner and Atari executives had jettisoned huge blocks of Warner shares just before the price tumbled. Stockholders filed suit to find out what actually happened inside the company, and the Securities and Exchange Commission is investigating.

All over America, landlords who only a few years ago were forcing Mom-&-Pop grocery stores and boutiques out of their locations so the shops could be converted into videogame arcades, are finding they have echoing emptinesses to show for the sudden drop in clientele. As quickly as it dominated the scene, the videogame craze has receded.

At moments like these, I find my reluctant acceptance of the transient nature of the human race ameliorated. Perhaps the cockroaches *won't* take over in my lifetime.

On the other hand, the spirit of James Watt is still with us.

A LOVE SONG TO JERRY FALWELL

This indictment of the ways in which society brutalizes its creative geniuses originally appeared as "Black Thoughts/Blood Thoughts" in the April 1969 issue of Richard Geis's SF Review. It was reworked in 1973 for inclusion in Dart, a literary publication of Dartmouth College, revised again for the 1983 Yearbook of P.E.N. Los Angeles, and has been especially revised and expanded for publication here. In mood and imagery it resembles Harlan's fiction writing more than any other entry in this collection.

First, let us sit in the dark, as *they* sit in darkness, and hear words from writers.

Don Marquis said: "If you make people think they're thinking, they'll love you; but if you *really* make them think, they'll hate you."

Geoffrey Wolff said:

Writing has nothing much to do with pretty manners, and less to do with sportsmanship or restraint...Every writer begins as a subversive, if in nothing more than the antisocial means by which he earns his keep. Finally, every fantasist who cannibalizes himself knows that misfortune is his friend, that grief feeds and sharpens his fancy, that hatred is as sufficient a spur to creation as love (and a world more common) and that without an instinct for lunacy he will come to nothing.

Arthur Miller said: "Society and man are mutually dependent enemies and the writer's job [is] to go on forever defining and defending the paradox lest, God forbid, it be resolved."

And, finally, Robert Coover has said:

The best social orders run down with time, and so occasionally you have to tear it all apart and start over. Primitive societies set aside a time each year to do this on a ritual basis. Get drunk, break all the rules, commune with the primordial chaos and the dreamtime of the civilizers, recapture the sense of community and thus of order. Anyway, good excuse for a party...

...it's the role of the author, the fiction maker, the mythologizer, to be the creative spark in this process of renewal: he's the one who tears apart the old story, speaks the unspeakable, makes the ground shake,

then shuffles the bits back together into a new story.”

But they are writers. What else would they say to defend themselves? They are professional liars. And has not one of their own, Pushkin, said: “Better the illusions that exalt us than ten thousand truths”?

So what are we to make of the mind of the writer? What are we to think of the purgatory in which dreams are born, from whence come the derangements that men call magic because they have no other names for smoke or fog or hysteria? What are we to dwell upon when we consider the forms and shadows that become stories? Must we dismiss them as fever dreams, as merely expressions of creativity, as purgatives? Or may we deal with them even as the naked ape dealt with them: as the only moments of truth a human calls throughout a life of endless lies. Are they not evil, these liars? Consider their aberrations!

Who will be the first to acknowledge that it was only a membrane, only a vapor, that separated a Robert Burns and his love from de Sade and his hate?

Is it too terrible to consider that a Dickens, who could drip treacle and God bless us one and all, through the mouth of a potboiler character called Tiny Tim, could also create the escaped convict Magwitch; the despoiler of children, Fagin; the murderous Sikes? Is it that great a step to consider that a woman surrounded by love and warmth and care of humanity as was Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, could produce a work of such naked horror as *Frankenstein*? Can the mind equate the differences and similarities that allow both an “Annabel Lee” and a “Masque of the Red Death” to emerge from the same churning pit of thought-darkness?

Consider the dreamers; all of the dreamers; the glorious and the corrupt:

Aesop and Amado; Borges and Benvenuto Cellini; Chekhov and Chang Tao-ling; Democritus, Disraeli; Epicurus and Ralph Ellison; Faure and Fitzgerald; Goethe, Garibaldi; Huysmans and Hemingway; ibn-al-Farid and Ives; Dalton Trumbo and Mark Twain; and on and on. All the dreamers. Those whose visions took form in blood and those which took form in music. Dreams fashioned of words, and nightmares molded of death and pain. Is it inconceivable to consider that Richard Speck—who slaughtered eight nurses in Chicago in 1966, who was sentenced to 1,200 years in prison—was a devout Church-going Christian, a boy who lived in the land of God, while Jean Genet—avowed thief, murderer, pederast, vagrant who spent the first thirty years of his life as an enemy of society, and in the jails of France

where he was sentenced to life imprisonment—has written prose and poetry of such blazing splendor that Sartre called him “saint”? Does the mind shy away from the truth that a Bosch could create hell-images so burning, so excruciating that no other artist has ever even attempted to copy his staggeringly brilliant style, while at the same time he produced works of such ecumenical purity as *L'Épiphanie*? All the dreamers. All the mad ones and the noble ones, all the seekers after alchemy and immortality, all those who dashed through endless midnights of gore-splattered horror and all those who strolled through sunshine springtimes of humanity. They are one and the same. They are all born of the same desire.

Speechless, we stand before Van Gogh's *Starry Night* or one of those hell-images of Hieronymous Bosch, and we find our senses reeling; vanishing into a daydream mist of *what must this man have been like, what must he have suffered?* A passage from Dylan Thomas, about birds singing in the eaves of a lunatic asylum, draws us up short, steals the breath from our mouths; and the blood and thoughts stand still in our bodies as we are confronted with the absolute incredible achievement of what they have done. The impossibility of it. So imperfect, so faulty, so broken the links in communication between humans, that to pass along one corner of a vision we have had to another creature is an accomplishment that fills us with pride and wonder, touching us and them for a nanoinstant with magic. How staggering it is then to *see—to know* what Van Gogh and Bosch and Thomas knew and saw. To live for that nanoinstant what they lived. To look out of their eyes and view the universe from a never-before-conquered height, from a dizzying, strange place.

This, then, is the temporary, fleeting, transient, incredibly valuable, priceless gift from the genius dreamer to those of us crawling forward moment after moment in time, with nothing to break our routine save death.

Mud-condemned, forced to deal as ribbon clerks with the boredoms and inanities of lives that may never touch—save by this voyeuristic means—a fragment of glory...our only hope, our only pleasure, is derived through the eyes of the genius dreamers; the genius madmen; the creators.

How amazed...how stopped like a broken clock we are, when we are in the presence of the creator. When we see what singular talents—wrought out of torment—have proffered; what magnificence, or depravity, or beauty, perhaps in a spare moment, only half-trying; they have brought it forth nonetheless, for the rest of eternity and the world to treasure.

Ah, but using an artist's life to judge his work is a childish habit,

and anything that helps kick it out of us does us good. (It's a mean-spirited practice, as well, since it's used only by people who want to sneer at the artist. Do these high-minded types ever say how marvelous it is that such exquisite work could rise out of a sordid life? Do they eagerly pick up a dull book when they learn that its author had a beautiful soul?) As for the hero worship, that's childish and unfair as well. Why does the creation of a work of art impose on the artist the obligation to lead an exemplary life? Why do we demand an unreasonable nobility that none of *us* possess? The artists have fulfilled their contract with us by producing work that gives pleasure or insight or both. Why hold them to an unwritten morals clause?

And how awed we are, when caught in the golden web of that true genius—so that finally, for the first time we know that all the rest of it was kitsch; it is made so terribly, crushingly obvious to us, just how mere, how petty, how mud-condemned we really are, and that the only grandeur we will ever know is that which we know second-hand from our damned geniuses. That the closest we will ever come to our “Heaven” while alive, is through our unfathomable geniuses, however imperfect or bizarre they may be.

And is this, then, why we treat them so shamefully, harm them, chivvy and harass them, drive them inexorably to their personal madhouses, kill them? Lock them away in darkness? Cell doors slam, and the dream light goes out.

Who is it, we wonder, who *really* still the golden voices of the geniuses, who turn their visions to dust?

Who, the question asks itself unbidden, are the savages and who the princes?

Fortunately, the night comes quickly, their graves are obscured by darkness, and answers can be avoided till the next time; till the next marvelous singer of strange songs is stilled in the agony of his rhapsodies.

On all sides the painter wars with the photographer. The dramatist battles the television scenarist. The novelist is locked in combat with the reporter and the creator of the non-novel. As Voltaire has said, “Despite the enormous quantity of books, how few people read! And if one reads profitably, one would realize how much stupid stuff the vulgar herd is content to swallow every day.” On all sides the struggle to build dreams is beset by the forces of materialism, the purveyors of the instant, the dealers in tawdriness, the tunnel-visioned censors, the Authorities, the jailers, the preservers of the Public Morality. The writer, the creator falls into disrepute. Of what good is he? Does he tell us useable gossip, does he explain our current situation, does he “tell it like it is”? No, he only preserves the past and points the way to the future. He merely performs the holiest of chores. Thereby

becoming a luxury, a second-class privilege to be considered only after the newscasters and the sex images and the “personalities.” No one calls for his release; no one wishes to hear his bad news. The public entertainments, the safe and sensible entertainments, those that pass through the soul like beets through a baby’s backside...these are the hallowed, the revered. How many noted that John Gardner died in a motorcycle crash mere blocks from his home, on the day Grace Kelly died and commanded all the headlines?

And what of the mad dreams, the visions of evil and destruction? What becomes of them? In a world of Tiny Tim, there is little room for Magwitch, though the former be saccharine and the latter be noble.

Who will speak out for the mad dreamers? Who will open their cells?

Who will ensure with sword and shield and grants of monies that these most valuable will not be thrown into the lye pits of mediocrity, the meat grinders of safe reportage? Who will care that they suffer all their nights and days of delusion and desire for ends that will never be noticed? There is no foundation that will enfranchise them, no philanthropist who will risk his hoard in the hands of the mad ones.

And so, till they go to prison or madhouse they go their ways, walking all the plastic paths filled with noise and neon, their multifaceted bee-eyes seeing much more than the clattering groundlings will ever see, reporting back from within their torments that Reagans cannot save nor Falwells uplift. Reporting back that the midnight of madness is upon us; that wolves who turn into men are stalking our babies; that trees will bleed and birds will speak in strange tongues. Reporting back that the grass will turn blood-red and the mountains soften and flow like butter; that the seas will congeal and harden for iceboats to skim across from the chalk cliffs of Dover to Calais.

The mad dreamers among us will tell us that if we take a woman (that most familiar of alien creatures that we delude ourselves into thinking we rule and understand to the core) and pull her inside-out we will have a wondrousness that looks like the cloth-of-gold gown in which Queen Ankhesenamun was interred. That if we inject the spinal fluid of the dolphin into the body of the dog, our pets will speak in the riddles of a Delphic Oracle. That if we smite the very rocks of the Earth with quicksilver staffs, they will split and show us where our ghosts have lived since before the winds traveled from pole to pole.

The geniuses, the mad dreamers, those who write of debauchery in the spirit, they are the condemned of our times; they give everything, receive nothing, and expect in their silliness to be spared the gleaming axe of the executioner. How they will whistle as they die!

Let the rulers and the politicians and the financiers throttle the dreams of creativity. It doesn't matter.

The mad ones will persist. In the face of certain destruction they will still speak of the unreal, the forbidden, all the seasons of the witch.

They will end unnoticed like Gardner, or humiliated even in death as was Garcia Lorca. They will write from inside prisons and read their thoughts to rats. But they will persist.

They have no choice.

One of their number, Mario Vargas Llosa, has said, "Writers are exorcists of their own demons." And as mirrors of their species, they will continue to deliver the good news and the bad news, that *We* are *God*, that *We* possess in language—the one tool that enables us to grasp hold of our lives and transcend our Fate by understanding it—the means to reach the center of the universe and, our salvation, the center of our hearts.

For this, they live forever in darkness.

SCIENCE FICTION: TURNING REALITY INSIDE-OUT

This piece originally was written in 1974 for New Times. In it, Harlan lists real-life scenarios which would be labeled preposterous if written as fiction. "Yes, Virginia," Harlan says, "I now believe in the Easter Bunny, the Great Pumpkin, Santa Claus, Ronald Reagan and other mythical beasts." (1974, remember.) That Harlan's "mythical beasts" include a future President of the United States goes farther toward proving his point than even he could possibly have predicted.

If you stuck your hand down inside Richard Nixon's mouth, and reached as far as you could, down where the morality ought to be, and grabbed onto whatever was handy in that empty space, and yanked the sonofabitch inside-out, what you'd have would be something the first astronauts who'll land on Delta Eradini IX might have to dicker with. An alien.

No. Strike that. If I had been predicting what the final disposition would be in the matter of Milhous—and events have moved so fast I've had to rewrite this lead four times since I began—if I had been writing it as science fiction...speculative fiction...that hideous neologism "sci-fi"...whatever we're calling it currently...it would have read like so:

Ford wouldn't have been such a patsy, he would have crossed Nixon up and refused him the immunity that turkey won in the plea-bargaining just to go away; then, in my little fantasy, events would move swiftly. They put him on trial, they move with all deliberate speed (like the Galapagos tortoise trying to find the sea), a miracle gets passed and they convict him. And they sentence him to be put on public display, every day for ten years, in Washington, D.C. Not in the stocks, nothing like that. Just standing there on a little platform, maybe three steps up; and every single American citizen, every man, woman and child, would be permitted to come and get in line and walk up those three steps and confront him, the King of the Thugs, and have the right to slap him. Just once. No closed fists. Just flat palm. Across the cheek. Or if it was a legless vet from the Nam, maybe across the mouth. But only once. Four hours in the morning. Break for lunch. Four hours in the afternoon. That's how I'd write it.

And some poor sap would call *that* science fiction.

Yeah. Sure.

Catch this: fantasy has become reality AKA reality has turned into

fantasy. If you, for a nanosecond, doubt the inescapable truth of that theme, consider the following “fantasy” concepts which, if a heavyweight sf writer like James Tiptree, Jr. or Kate Wilhelm were to use them as the basis for a story in *Analog* or *Galaxy*, they’d be receiving letter-bombs from crazed Trekkies out there in The Great American Heartland.

- A chief executive is faced with the choice of exploding or not exploding a thermonuclear instrument that, he is advised by responsible scientific authorities, may well break off a large chunk of the North American continent and float it off toward the polar ice cap. And he does it, sort of lackadaisically, with his left hand, offering without substantiation to the public, the rationale of “national security.”

- A woman is knifed to death in a city street over a period of forty-five minutes, while 38 people watch from their windows, draw up chairs to get a better view, turn up their radios so they don’t have to hear her scream and plead for help, open their apartment doors and see the murderer slashing her throat and then having relations with her half-dead body...and do nothing to stop it.

- The attractive young daughter of a millionaire publishing magnate gets kidnapped by revolutionary militants and, in a cliché replay of *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*, falls in love with her captors and joins them, becoming a burp-gun-toting bank robber herself.

- A soldier massacres an entire village of innocent people, down to the last terrified infant and, when he’s court-martialed, doesn’t go up before a firing squad, he’s put in a cozy bungalow with visiting privileges for his girl friend.

- Out of nowhere, an “energy crisis” develops in a world long-warned of impending depletion of natural resources. It lasts six months and the sole effect it has on anyone is that gas jumps thirty cents a gallon in price; the “crisis” vanishes as quickly as it appeared, and no one seems to care they’ve been jobbed for millions of dollars.

- A mediocre novelist dreams up a bogus biography of a mysterious recluse billionaire, markets it to cynical and businesswise publishers for a small fortune, convinces the most trusted national periodical that it’s authentic, and only gets caught because his ineptitudes are so flagrant even a microcephalic could not overlook them.

Don’t stop me. I could go on for *days*. Are they utterly fantastic, science fictional phantasms you’d reject if you read them in a short story or a novel? The *ayes* have it. No self-respecting writer, in or out of the field of sf would touch them. Too silly. Too ripe for being exploded by simple logic. Far easier to write about bug-eyed, guacamole-colored extraterrestrials from Proxima Centauri.

But. Nixon *did* explode the Amchitka bomb, Kitty Genovese was

slaughtered in Kew Gardens while her neighbors watched, Patty Hearst is *still* at large, Lieutenant Calley hasn't *yet* gone to prison, we're *still* spinning widdershins from that "crisis" only six months ago and *nobody's* driving at 55 mph, Clifford Irving *did* flummox *Life* and McGraw-Hill, and yes, Virginia I now believe in the Easter Bunny, the Great Pumpkin, Santa Claus, Ronald Reagan and other mythical beasts.

All of which sorta kinda answers the question sf writers get asked at cocktail parties, "Do you have a hard time keeping up with reality in your fantastic stories?"

And in case you don't catch my drift here, the answer is, hell no, we don't have a hard time keeping up with reality; we try to ignore it; we're way ahead of it; who can deal with such craziness? Fantasy makes more sense. Or more precisely, we're too busy reaching down into its gullet and yanking it inside-out to worry that Mars is another Okie Dust Bowl instead of the faerie landscape of spires and minarets that Ray Bradbury envisioned in *The Martian Chronicles*. Ray isn't even worried; you ain't gonna catch him in a million years. Nor any of us.

We're your special dreamers.

We're busy interpreting your nightmares, analyzing your neuroses, plumbing your libidos and sucking out your ids. We *know* you're scared shitless that some computerized waldo-armed machine is going to replace you at the chicken-flicking shop. We *know* you can't handle the rise of feminism, you poor machismo-drenched wimps. We *know* future shock and the information-drain and technology confuse you. And God has sent us to make it all better. (We've got a few thoughts on *that* subject, as well.)

Which is why academicians who used to be sunk to their armpits in dissections of the use of the semi-colon in the lesser works of Henry James have fastened themselves like succubi to the throat of science fiction, sucking here and there for a pulsing carotid artery of Doctoral Thesis Material.

No longer is there a need, in articles of this sort, to explain what it is "scientifiction." You know. It's being taught in almost a thousand U.S. colleges and universities as an accredited course; learned papers are delivered by Jesuit priests at Modern Language Association conclaves, sandwiching in discussions of the Utopian visions of Ursula K. Le Guin between Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner; Fowles writes sf, Nabokov writes sf, Pynchon writes sf, even Allen Drury (God save us), writes what he *thinks* is sf. Asimov can be seen lounging next to this year's cinema sex symbol on the Cavett show, Robert Heinlein gets only slightly less for a lecture than Jeb Stuart Magruder and doesn't even have to go to the slam for the privilege; and the World SF

Convention now draws over four thousand rabid fans who come to touch the hem of Roger Zelazny's coat-of-many colors.

You don't need to know that sf in its modern incarnation began with Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* in April, 1926. You don't need to know that the lineal history of the art-form goes all the way back to Lucian of Samosata and can be heroically traced through the works of Homer, Thomas More, Swift, Mary Shelley, Mark Twain, Poe, Hawthorne, Balzac, Doyle, Wells, Kipling, Verne, Huxley, Orwell, Hersey, Barth, Burgess, Borges...that whole crowd. It isn't necessary any longer to reiterate those musty credentials. (Though every time a television talk-show features sf it lumbers through that boneyard; and sf writers featured as guests on such shows murmur the ritual incantations of "acceptable" writers who've worked in the form, thereby demonstrating the persistence of an inferiority complex that began with the pulp magazines and their lurid covers.)

Validation of the importance of sf as virtually the only credible fiction form being written these days comes from anomalous and unexpected corners: pianist Garrick Ohlsson is featured in a booze ad and lists as his most memorable book (sic) Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*; the taste in leisure reading matter for government clerks and congressmen in Washington has switched from spy novels to sf (and doesn't *that* send a chill up your spine!); the staid and conservative Hayden Planetarium puts on a series of sf films—which series gets sold out the first day—and has the editor of *Analog Science Fiction/Fact* magazine as host; porn star Georgina Spelvin ("The Devil in Miss Jones") comes out of the closet and cops to her most secret vice...she's a sf freako-pervo-devo.

As an explanation, in part, of the booming popularity of speculative fiction—it's the only category of fiction outside Gothic novels that consistently makes money for paperback publishers—two words must be herewith entered, at the risk of causing massive coronaries among many of the old guard of sf fans. The words are "New Wave." In 1965 when the "New Wave" controversy exploded in the genre, I would have insisted no such thing really existed. As recently as last year I found myself saying in print that no such thing as a "New Wave" ever *had* existed, that it was merely a great number of writers suddenly breaking loose, all at the same time, and taking the form in directions quite different from the traditionally accepted paths. But *this* year, what with the many learned re-examinations of sf by critics and other noble types, I'm compelled to admit that, yeah, I guess New Wave was a real thing. (You'll never know how it pains me to have to admit it. Humbly, I now accept the label of Antichrist slapped on me by the hard-science types who insisted I was a cabal leader in the New Wave movement. There's even one brain-damaged

fan who takes every possible opportunity to write in to magazines where my work appears, to pillory me for singlehandedly polluting the precious bodily fluids of science fiction. Watch the letter column of this magazine; he's bound to surface...like the rotting skeleton of a stegosaurus in a bubbling tar pit.)

Originally written by science hobbyists and aficionados of imaginative literature who were more Technocrats than Tellers of Tales, early sf was topheavy with gimmicks, the physical sciences, papier-mache heros and the cliches of "romantic fiction" that avoided reality as much as possible. In the late Fifties and early Sixties the new writers coming to the form found themselves hamstrung and frustrated by conventions in the genre that limited their horizons. Experimental writers like Ballard, Moorcock and Aldiss in Great Britain and Disch, Wilhelm and Spinrad in America (to name only a six-pack), began writing and getting published stories that spoke about war, politics, sex, race and labor relations, interpersonal relationships, the drug culture and a wide range of other "excluded" topics; they wrote about the real world in fantasy terms—in ways that had never been permitted between the covers of magazines often edited for the acceptability of the mothers of fourteen-year-old boys only recently weaned from *The Incredible Hulk* and Tom Swift, Jr.

The foofaraw should have died away immediately. It was no big deal. There's always been more than enough room in sf for *every* kind of writing. But those who had grown up with sf as a secret vice, who had been laughed at by their contemporaries for reading *that crazy stuff*, saw in the New Wave a desire to accept the traditional literary values of the mainstream, of "good" writing. Nothing could have threatened them more. "Good" writing always meant, to them, dark and introverted examinations of the twisted souls of losers and other non-subscribers to the Protestant Work Ethic. They foresaw sf anthologies and magazines filled with Portnoys. (But the closest they got was Malzberg's *Herovit*, which was bad enough for their tender psyches.) Everything was moving too fast for them, everything was changing as sf became popular very quickly. And while there was balm in being accepted as legitimate, finally, at last, they resented the blurring of the boundaries. Why, one could board the New York-Washington, D.C. air shuttle and see simply *anyone* reading a Philip K. Dick novel, or a hundredth reprint of van Vogt's *The Weapon Shops*.

It's a recognizable syndrome. The *Cahiers du Cinema*-oriented crowd in New York loved the work of Sam Peckinpah...as long as he was starving and couldn't get a gig; today he's accepted everywhere, and they put him down. The rock ingroup at *Rolling Stone* enthused over Three Dog Night until they became enormously popular with the mindless masses *Stone* rejects in its infra-hip columns...now they

won't even mention the group. The in places to dine, the unknown writers, the singers with one record...they're much beloved, till they're "discovered" and become common coin. Then the bloody faithful who have borne with, through insult and being ignored, turn like asps. And when Vonnegut—wisely, for the sake of a promising career and an enormous talent—made it perfectly clear that though some of his early stories were published in sf magazines, he was *not* a science fiction writer (and not coincidentally hit the bestseller lists soon after), you could hear the screams of betrayal and denunciation from the sf audience a hundred light-years off.

But the truth of the matter is simply that the incredible popularity of sf on college campuses and in intellectual circles can be traced to the new breed of sf writers who, while maintaining the best elements of what was written before, conceive of themselves as *writers*, not science hobbyists. Some of them, without the slightest touch of pomposity, in almost an antic sense, look on themselves as serious creators. They laugh at themselves and the world, but they know damned well what they are doing is meaningful; something the old guard always doubted. Can't blame them, really: one cannot be laughed at for forty years without some feelings of ego-weakness and insecurity rubbing off.

And that is one part of the reason for the current success of sf. Its practitioners are committed men and women. The other part is that sf writers have grasped the import of the reality-into-fantasy concept. They understand that most of the things happening to us cannot be interpreted by Schlesingers or Theodore H. Whites or even Updikes and Susanns in any ways that relate to our pain. In short, mimetic fiction has done had it. When the contemporary novel dead-ends in the cul-de-sacs of Chuck Barris and Harold Robbins and Rona Barrett and poor, sad Portnoy making love to a piece of *flanken*, those who still have dreams seek elsewhere for that which uplifts and ennobles and explains. Apparently, desperate, the ones with hope have turned back to the ancient tradition of the myth, the fable, the allegory... science fiction.

In a world where lies abound, where parents and teachers and politicians and clergy and one's peer-group try to pass off the three-dollar-bill as stable currency, the sf writer simply says, "What if?" And it is that ability to extrapolate, to seek the new rationale, the hidden design that fascinates so many hungry minds. For those unable to accept the ready rigamaroles of Business-as-Usual, Jesus-freakdom with all its anal retentive Fascism, the endless confusion of the sex-swallow, the sterility of middle-class suburban life, the soullessness of the academic tower, the mudfly madness of occultism or the empty roads leading from the lands of dope and liquor, sf suggests: *Find a*

new order to the universe, Dummy! An order in which you play a major part, not just as a cog. Be strong, be wise, and understand life has to amount to more than paying off the mortgage, or getting laid regularly, or earning an extra thirty cents an hour, or landing that windowless berth at National Cash Register, or simply going bananas and shooting motorists from an overpass.

They perceive in sf stories a common thread of humanity, that there is a *community of life* to which we all owe allegiance before the false karasses of city, state or nation, color, religion or social set. There is a bigness, a oneness that vibrates throughout *all sf*, that says we are not alone down here, as Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson put it, “lost in the stars.” We are cognitive elements of something universal that has an unkillable cathexis for survival...for *form*!

Struggling to cope with the ever-more-deadly pressures of a world in which order changes daily, in which generations come every fifteen minutes, in which language is so polluted that “the inoperative statement” becomes acceptable euphemism for “lie,” young people of all ages find a refreshing truth in the fantasy-lies of science fiction.

And not even bad movies like *Zardoz* or *Soylent Green* or *The Omega Man* (for all the money they make because the audience is manna-hungry for good sf), or bad tv series like “The Immortal” or “The Starlost” or “Planet of the Apes,” or bad books whose numbers are legion—not all of the unspeakable shit shoveled at the massmarket and the moron mentality and *called* sf can slow or kill the hyperthyroid attraction of science fiction.

It is a literature of ideas.

A literature of imagination.

And with the real world turning into an Hieronymous Bosch landscape before our very eyes, with Fords pardoning Nixons, with whole countrysides being swallowed by concrete and Colonel Sanders grease stops, with the persistence of attempts to make us behavior-modified Barbies and Kens, the mad dreams of the fantasists emerge as far more than amusing entertainments to be sniffed at by the Epsteins and *The New York Review of Whatever*.

They become a subversive weapon in the preservation of our sanity. They become the twopenny nail we’ve hidden in our palm, to cause us the pain we need to resist the mindwashing. They become the secret whimsies on which our thoughts fasten when, like Winston Smith in *1984*, we are thrown into whatever Room 101 the System thinks will whip us into shape.

If Henry David Thoreau were alive today, when he wasn’t busy taking a leak in Walden Pond, he’d be writing science fiction.

DEFEATING THE GREEN SLIME (HONEST TO GOD, A) MODEST PROPOSAL TIMOROUSLY VENTURED WITH TREPIDATION BY HARLAN ELLISON

The Nebula Awards are presented each year by the members of the Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA) at their annual bi-coastal banquet to those of their colleagues who have produced the best work in various categories during the preceding year. (Harlan, incidentally, has three of them.) The Drama Nebula, the category addressed in the following article, no longer exists. And that, in fact, is what the noise is all about. This article first appeared in the January 1976 Bulletin of the Science Fiction Writers of America.

Did you ever have the nervous feeling that the next letter you opened would contain a freeze-dried boa constrictor that would spring to life on contact with the air and squeeze you to death? Writing this little piece, on request of [SFWA] President Fred Pohl, gives me precisely that feeling.

So before I set it all out as simply and softly as I can possibly make it, *please* believe, on the sacred memories of my father, Gernsback, Socrates and Diogenes, I have no vested interest in this matter. It is a subject that has been raised among many of us who work in films and television over the past few years, and due to an apparently incurable case of foot-in-mouth disease, I'm the schmuck who voiced it publicly at the SFWA West Coast Regional Business Meeting last August at the NASFIC † convention in Los Angeles.

It is a topic to *discuss*, not an attempt to logroll, nest-feather, secretly govern or in any way pollute the integrity and/or cultural naivete of the SFWA. I make this introductory statement in the interests of sanity and calm discussion. Our membership has a lovable tendency to exercise itself about some of the most insignificant questions, and there are those of us in the film/tv arena who would like to see this one thought out gently, easily, without loud voices or special interests being served. I think that can best be accomplished by just stating the problem, throwing it open for comment, and then working out a solution. There's no need to get too stimulated over this.

And I'd like to be kept out of it as much as possible.

The Nebula(s) for Best Dramatic Presentation could perhaps be selected in a more propitious fashion.

That is the form of the resolution.

Historically, in SFWA, we've voted on the Drama Nebula in precisely the same way the print media Nebulas were nominated and awarded. We haven't been quite as concerned with the Drama Nebulas as with the more familiar categories, chiefly because a small percentage of our membership has been employed in the areas that Nebula touches, and so it has been something of an illegitimate offspring. But sf films and tv shows and stage productions and sf-affiliated record albums reach a much wider audience than even our most popular novels and stories. And to a large degree the public image of sf is conditioned by these mass-market presentations. So if we issue a Nebula to a film such as *Soylent Green*, and put our stamp on it as the best filmed sf of a given year, *that* is sf for a great many uninformed observers.

So far, I don't think I've said anything to offend anyone.

Putting aside, for the moment, our affection for Harry Harrison and *Make Room! Make Room!* (from which *Soylent Green* was very loosely adapted), that was a film about which many of us had grave reservations. Not so much as an action-adventure film, but as a stalking horse for sf in general. In the same year *Soylent Green* was on the ballot, it ran against Michael Crichton's *Westworld*, a theatrical feature; Bruce Jay Friedman's *Steambath*, a stage production done as film for the Public Broadcasting System; and Brian Moore's *Catholics*, a made-for-TV film. I have no way to substantiate this, but I think I'm on fairly safe grounds when I suggest that *one* of the reasons *Soylent Green* won the Nebula was that at least two of the other nominees were never seen by a sufficiently representative segment of our membership to win them the votes they deserved. *Soylent Green* may well have been the best dramatic sf offering of 1973 but because a) it was highly publicized, b) it was open and available nationwide, c) it was in local theaters during the time nominations were open and could be seen at leisure, and d) was written by "one of our people" and based on an accepted sf work...it had a far better chance to cop the votes.

I am suggesting that this may not be the fairest conditions for selecting something as specialized as a Drama Nebula.

Books and stories are always there. If something gets ten or fifteen recommendations, most of us who give a damn about choosing *the best* will seek out that item and read it. Such is not always the case with a film, a play or a staged happening that may be available only in Los Angeles or New York or Chicago or San Francisco. There's really no

need for me to go into this aspect of the problem. Think on it for a moment and you'll come up with the same unhappy truths I find about the availability of "art" throughout non-urban areas of the United States.

Superlative art films such as the Czech animated film *La Planete Sauvage* or the briefly-seen Broadway production of *Warp* simply don't make it to many small towns or even to many large cities. Distribution and other problems are at the core of the thing, but that's not our concern.

What is our concern, it seems to me, is making sure that the best dramatic presentation wins that block of lucite each year.

What has been suggested, not only by me but by others, is that a special rotating blue-ribbon panel of writers directly concerned with the visual media select the winner.

Now the screams begin.

But please hold your peace for a moment.

I'll try to make this as painless as possible.

We have an excellent group of members who have worked in these areas. Not just Robert Bloch and John Jakes and Dorothy Fontana and Norman Spinrad, but George Zebrowski, Leigh Brackett, Russell Bates, Forrest Ackerman, Jerry Bixby, Ralph Blum, Ben Bova, Ray Bradbury, Larry Brody, Ed Bryant, Arthur Clarke, Richard Delap, Robert Silverberg, Richard Lupoff, Chip Delany, Phil Farmer, Larry Niven, David Gerrold, Dick Geis, Ron Goulart, Jim Gunn, Harry Harrison, Frank Herbert, A. E. van Vogt, Fritz Leiber, Baird Searles, Joanna Russ, Mike Moorcock, Fred Pohl, Tom Reamy, Gene Roddenberry, Bill Rotsler, Tom Scortia, Frank Robinson, Henry Slesar, Jerry Sohl, Ted Sturgeon, Bob Tucker, and David Wise have all been involved with film/tv or criticism of same in varying degrees of commitment for years. (I've no doubt missed a batch of names. These are the ones that memory and the 1975 Directory brought to my mind first. Apologies to the others who are qualified for such a blue ribbon panel, whom I've overlooked.)

Mechanics for such a panel would, of course, have to be worked out. But apart from the obvious elements—a small group that would overlap a few members from year to year but which would be replaced *in toto* every two or three years...members whose work was eligible being dropped during that period...nominations accepted from anyone, anywhere during the open eligibility period—it doesn't seem too difficult.

The only objection I can foresee to such a proposal would be that it removes from the open membership control of one Nebula award. But that control has been removed *de facto* as the system now works.

On the plus side, I suggest that truly deserving works that are

missed entirely by the membership at large would be brought to all our attentions...the judgment as to who *exactly* deserves the physical award would be simplified, thus eliminating the expense and embarrassment of proliferating Nebulae given to three producers, a director, a scenarist and the creator of the source material...the presently unfair edge given to big box-office smashes would be eliminated...regional drama (such as in Dayton, St. Louis, Chicago and other centers of way-off-off-Broadway production) would be considered...radio dramas, educational tv offerings, foreign films, record albums, art exhibits could all be considered.

Well, that's it.

Two small final comments, however.

First, I'm aware of a kind of snobbishness on the part of some of our older, more print-oriented members toward film and tv. I suggest to them that while *they* may think the only good sf is that which comes writ in lines on paper, that to several succeeding generations, the visual interpretations of imaginative fiction are equally as potent. We are a film literature, whether we care to admit it or not. And it's perhaps about time we started to pay some serious attention to that truth. Everyone else seems to understand the power of film/tv. SFWA doesn't. This proposal, and the calm, reasoned discussion I hope it engenders, ought to open the question for examination.

And second, and last, I suggest that those who are not familiar with script, or film, or the problems of judging visual presentations, hold off their comments till the writers working in the field have opened this all up a bit. What I'm suggesting is that Bob Bloch and John Jakes and Norman Spinrad and Leigh Brackett and David Gerrold and a few others who deal with this kind of thing regularly dash off your thoughts at once, just to present some other aspects of the question from a fully-informed point of view, before the less-concerned elements of the membership begin running amuck.

And if at all possible, let's try to remember that we all present ourselves as honest men and women, without private axes to hone. If we hold to that belief, we may be able to deal with this thing without someone suggesting all of us slimey Hollywood hacks want to build our stock with the gullible studios.

Was that soft enough, Fred?

...but they didn't listen to him, so Harlan finally got disgusted and delivered his famous

resignation speech from the Science Fiction Writers of America, 30 April 1977 New York City

It is important to remember that Harlan's disenchantment with SFWA's

parochialism was even more meaningful in light of the intensity of his involvement with the organization up to this time. Not only was he the recipient of the first short story Nebula awarded by SFWA, but he had in fact served as its first Vice President.

**HOW YOU STUPIDLY BLEW FIFTEEN MILLION DOLLARS A WEEK,
AVOIDED HAVING AN ADENOID-SHAPED SWIMMING POOL IN
YOUR BACKYARD, MISSED THE OPPORTUNITY TO HAVE A
MUTUALLY DESTRUCTIVE LOVE AFFAIR WITH CLINT EASTWOOD
AND/OR RAQUEL WELCH, AND OTHERWISE PISSED ME OFF**

As this is a significant position statement for me, and has some import for SFWA, I'm really delighted to see such a nice spotty crowd. The title of my talk is *not* "Hollywood" as it appears in the program, courtesy of the timorous management. It is a somewhat longer title and was intended to raise sufficient wrath and ire, with the feeble hope that the room would be crowded. No such luck; typical SFWA non-interest; they're all in the bar.

No matter: I intend to say a number of things people will not enjoy hearing today, and it's best most of them don't hear it; I don't want to disturb their long sleep. I hope to raise a lynch tenor in the mob. Sort of social work among the somnolent.

The actual title of my talk is "How You Stupidly Blew Fifteen Million Dollars a Week, Avoided Having an Adenoid-Shaped Swimming Pool in Your Backyard, Missed the Opportunity to Have a Mutually Destructive Love Affair with Clint Eastwood and/or Raquel Welch, and Otherwise Pissed Me Off." *That* is the title. Tom Purdom says it's not an appropriate title for the program book. I hadn't realized we were taking ourselves so seriously these days, but then, one can expect little better from SFWA.

This may be a bit disparate because a number of things are coming together; but I'll try to get to it in a fairly coherent manner...if I can get past my anger.

Over the last few years I've been extremely concerned about the way the drama category of the Nebulas has been handled and I went so far as to suggest a way in which it could be handled more propitiously. You may recall seeing the article in the SFWA *Bulletin*.† But with this slavish dedication to preserving the rights of the common man, people said no, no, we cannot remove the wonderfulness of the drama category from the hands of the membership (who don't know shit from Shinola anyhow, but what does that matter) and we must continue to let them vote on things they neither understand nor care about.

Thus, we have continued awarding the drama Nebula, that wonderful, expensive Nebula...to people who frankly could not care

less. They don't know SFWA exists; they think of us (when informed we exist) as another group of self-serving amateurs. They don't show up at the banquet; they don't give a damn, and it's not their fault. They think sf is "sci-fi." And they do not care about SFWA. To them, if we impinge at all, in their minds we are a bunch of pishers. The persistence of their attitude is to me another indication of the sophomoric and amateurish way in which this organization is run; that such an attitude continues to prevail unchecked in the film industry says much about us.

Now, I would say this to our recently-reelected President, Mr. Offutt, but he, I think, is down in the bar again; at least he passed me heading in that direction about five minutes ago, as I was entering this room to begin speaking, which is all to the good, I suspect.

But. Let me start with an exemplary anecdote.

A couple or three or four years ago, Damon Knight had a Milford conference in Madeira Beach, Florida, and he invited a number of us to come down. Madeira Beach was going through, I think 120° heat with sand fleas and ugliness and a lot of rancid tourists from Kankakee and places of that nature, and there were fifteen motels in Madeira Beach, all of which had air conditioning. One did *not* have air conditioning. But it was \$2.00 less per day than all the others. Guess which one Damon booked us into? Gordy Dickson and the others who got there first managed to flee for their lives and got into the air conditioning. I, unfortunately, was condemned to Gehenna.

Now, what this meant to me was that Damon, who had grown up as a poor fan, though he now had money, and he had a home, and he was married to Kate Wilhelm—which is enough joy for any one human being—Damon was *still* thinking like a poor fan. No malevolence, just amateurishness. And he thought saving \$2.00 for each of us was more important than our comfort. Therefore, Andre Norton had a cardiac arrest and fell down half-dead. Burt Filer only survived by staying stoned. Gene Wolfe began speaking in tongues. I lost about twelve pounds, and couldn't sleep at night; and everyone was bitter and vicious to one another and damned near had to stay drunk to stay sane throughout the entire conference. Unfortunately, I don't drink. Damon *meant* well, but by extension this was indicative of much of the thinking that goes down in SFWA. It is a provincial, insular, hidebound, cocoon kind of thinking that goes back to 1926, when science fiction readers had to hide their copy of *Amazing Stories* inside the *National Geographic* for fear someone would laugh at them. Those days is gone, friends. We are very much legitimate now. Serious reviews, college courses in sf, academic studies...and Hollywood. In the last year, the last fiscal twelve months, by precise count on my calendar, I have received 51 calls from members of SFWA asking me

to assist them with some matter that involves the film or TV industry in Hollywood. Would I find them an agent...here is a book that somebody has made a bid on...what can I tell them about this producer or that...somebody is offering \$1.26 in Blue Chip stamps for a year's option...what should they do...would I mind just kinda looking into it for them? All of that good stuff. I unfailingly helped, not because I am a noble and wonderful human being, but because it seems to me that with all the schleppers who are writing science fiction out there, a few of *our* people should have a chance.

But every single time it happens, our people don't know how to act. They don't know how to make a deal. They don't know what an agent is for. They have absolutely no conception of what it's all about on the Coast. They are constantly being ripped off. The classic story is Robert Bloch selling *Psycho* for something like \$700, because a stalking horse intermediary was employed, instead of Alfred Hitchcock's people at Universal dealing directly.

It goes on and on and on; and I say to myself, "Well, you know, they don't really care. They don't look at Hollywood in a rational way: it's something alien to them, and they don't want any part of it."

As witness: what goes down with the drama category, which now, in case you haven't read your latest *Forum*,[†] has been permanently killed, by enlightened vote of the membership in Kankakee.

You have now gotten rid of that odious, troublesome drama category. I bring to your attention, however, the current edition of *The Third Degree*, which is the newsletter of the Mystery Writers of America. They have their nominations for the 1977 Edgar Allan Poe Awards in here, and they have the usual categories: best novel, best first novel, best paperback, best short story.

They *also* have best motion picture, best teleplay, and a couple of other categories involving the visual media.

They understand. They understand that out on that far Coast there are an infinite number of clowns who have come out of mailrooms, publicity sinecures, advertising agencies, their mother's wombs... directly into ownership of production companies or studios. *And these people like to steal properties.* They don't understand that they are not allowed to steal properties. They just *do* it!

I had a meeting with a producer, and he wanted me to do a giant ant movie. And I said that's a dumb movie; I don't want to do that. He said, well, if you don't like *that* one I've got a lot of other ideas. I said, oh yeah? And he pointed to a stack of old *pulp* magazines. And he said, yeah, I just poke through there and I pick out whatever I like.

Fred Pohl tells a similar story; maybe about the same guy, I don't know.

They don't know that you exist. They don't know that you *own* those properties. Therefore, when *The Man Who Fell to Earth* is made, and they rip off Walter Tevis again, as they did with *The Hustler*, so that he winds up in an alcoholic ward someplace in Ohio, for the second time, I get a call within a month of the release of that film and its huge box office returns, from two different networks and three unrelated independent production companies, wanting to do, specifically, ripoffs of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. And I, being the ethical lad that I am, say I'm sorry. I cannot rip off my friends. I will come in and think up another idea for you, equally as original and sensational as an alien falling to Earth. But I won't be a party to screwing Walter Tevis. Let's talk about something else science fictional. No, they say, we don't want science fiction, we want *The Man Who Fell to Earth*! We want to do *that*. And so, friends, next season there will be a TV series that is a direct ripoff of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. But Walt Tevis won't see a dime, nor will any of *you* ever see a dime when they rip off *your* books and stories.

But do you, does SFWA, have any concern about this ongoing loss of millions of dollars? Fuck, no! You're too busy worrying about a lousy 5 cents a word, while living in a sophomore's fantasy about EEE-vil Hollywood.

I stand before you today, with considerable rage. I'm up for the drama award this year, for an album that Roy and Shelley Torgeson produced on Alternate World Records. There's no doubt in my mind that I will lose; I simply will not win that award. Understand: much of what I say to you is out of pique at knowing upfront, in my bones, that I'm not going to win. But neither of the movies on the ballot will win, either. *Logan's Run* and *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, put on the ballot, arbitrarily, are not going to win either. "No Award" will win, friends. Mark my words.†

It is the final indictment of this organization. Because you people do not seem to understand that a penny a word, 2 cents a word, 5 cents a word is not Valhalla, for Christ's sake. Shamelessly, with nasty pleasure, I will brag at you; not from Cloud-Coocoo-Land, but from the World of Reality. I just made a deal for a two hour television pilot in January. They paid me \$35,000 to write it. It's six weeks work. \$35,000, friends, will give me nine free months this year to write whatever I please, for whatever market I please. I can write as many stories for Ed Ferman, and for Dave Hartwell and for *Midnight Sun* with its modest budget as I choose. I can indulge myself. I am free. Television and films are patrons of the arts. They are the Pope. They will let me paint my Sistine Chapel's ceiling any way I damn well choose.

But this organization still maintains that crazed, East Coast

mythology that what goes on in Hollywood is madness. That if you wind up out there you're either going to die like Nathanael West or Scott Fitzgerald, or wind up face-down in Gloria Swanson's swimming pool like William Holden.† Monsters, you think. Ghouls, you think.

You'll fall off the end of the flat Earth, you think. Simply stated, that is provincial thinking, pure bullshit; it purely is not the case. There are writers out there who have managed to make enormous sums of money, who continue writing their books and continue producing work that has enriched all of us. Consider: Bloch, Matheson, Nolan, Bradbury, Gerrold, Niven, myself; and to lesser note, because of personal problems and who they are...Sturgeon, Bixby, Russell, even Silverberg, who lobbied against the Drama Nebula.

But there are people who are stealing out of your pockets, and you are being *dumb* about it. I'm sorry I can't be more polite, but the lemming-like urge of this organization to destroy that category, not to handle it in an intelligent and financially enriching manner, to present the award in places where it can do us some good, get us some P.R. value, is to me absolutely blind and ridiculous. I will open this up to questions at any point. Anybody has anything to say or an insult to fling, please fling it. I'm extremely angry. But I'm feeling strong and secure in my position.

(NORMAN SPINRAD asked the first question; or rather, made the first audience comment.)

NORMAN SPINRAD: You know we *did* try. You know I was one of the people behind getting the damn category installed when there was a lot of resistance to it to begin with. But the first year that we did it in the Century Plaza out there, we contacted all the studios, we told MGM they were going to win long in advance, and what they did for us was fuck us. [Note: This is a reference to MGM's promising Charlton Heston would accept the Nebula on behalf of *Soylent Green*, but instead sent only a minor production official to the banquet.]

ELLISON: Okay. Let me deal with that for a moment. First of all, they don't even know SFWA exists at MGM.

SPINRAD: We told them.

ELLISON: We told them. Terrific! A guy calls them up; a guy calls a producer and says "Hey, we exist, and we really want you to come to this banquet." They get five thousand of those a day. Every halfwit group in America has some worthless award that doesn't mean a dime at the box office. The P.R. simply didn't cut it; that's why we were dismissed by MGM.

Recently a thug named Jack Laird at Universal sent out a brochure, a questionnaire, to something like two hundred members of SFWA saying, "Project X...we're thinking about maybe doing it. And

we want to do a thing about science fiction and we don't really know, but would you mind answering these few simple questions?" Thereupon followed five pages of the most detailed kinds of questions about how to build a society. Clifford Simak could have done 15 novels off the answers to those questions. What did our people do? They answered them. Instead of telling Laird he was a thief, or suggesting he pay for this special knowledge, or advising him to shove it, many of our people sent him pages of answers. David Gerrold knew what to do, Silverberg knew what to do, Bova and I knew what to do, Dorothy Fontana knew what to do: we immediately called The Writers Guild and said, "This man wants spec writing. This man is trying to bleed our minds." But what else happened? Larry Niven, flattered to death that someone in the Industry would write him, filled it out. Filled it out! So did a dozen others I know about. I don't know—how many of you others got that one? How many of you filled it out and sent it back?

JOE L. HENSLEY: I put down "up yours" and sent it back!

Good. That's showing him! Joe's an attorney: he understands.

I called the Writers Guild and complained about it. I advised the officers of SFWA. But nobody seemed really to understand the seriousness of that hype. Nobody seemed to care. They sent him all the material he could use! And that series is going to get done, no doubt. If he got only five of those questionnaires back, he's got enough stuff to cobble up a series, and nobody in SFWA is going to get a dime. And who are the writers who'll get the assignments to write segments of that series? Not Niven or Herbert or Asimov or any of *you*! It's going to be creative typists who sit there in their palatial homes in L.A. and write this shit night and day for television. You aren't going to see a dime of it. You're going to continue living in palatial *squalor* and then come together at circle-jerk gatherings like this one and stroke each other, or at fan conventions, lying to each other about the humble majesty of writing that holy literature, "sci-fi" while George Lucas gets fat off *Star Wars*!

But you need not have that. Pay attention: here's the sermon.

We live in a mixed-media society. For good or bad, television and films are with us for keeps. Tragically, the illiterates keep multiplying, and the audience for books *must* be kept alive! To be financially able to keep writing books—if one hasn't a career as a science teacher or as a used car salesman—one can subsidize the books by writing TV and films because—like it or not—that's where the action is. Take it or leave it: a show biz world. I am not saying desert books. Books are *my* first interest, books should be *your* first interest. They count. But the way to *support* the writing of your books is to get some of that film

and TV money. To live comfortably. It's no sin!

And if you *don't* get it, they're going to give it to the turkeys. And by staying stupid about it, by refusing to understand what goes down in that town, by refusing to take some action and have a drama category that is marketed properly to these people, you are slicing your own wrists.

Now, you say *how*? There are any number of ways. One of the ways is you spend a little money hiring a P.R. person. It can be done very inexpensively. A *professional* public relations company, not some friend of the family, some amateur helping us out in his or her spare time, but a solid, professional outfit that knows how to get into the studios. Somebody who works with the Motion Picture Producers Association can be hired for a stipend. There are many of them who are science fiction fans who would love to be associated with us, who in exchange for a few bucks and a dinner with Bradbury would happily do all the P.R. work for us.

These people and the more knowledgeable people in production, the younger people, are dying to meet you. Your names are legend to them, for Christ's sake. Your books inform and delight their days and nights. They think of you as Gods on far mountaintops. It's the entrenched old tigers who are unaware you exist. So go through the awe-struck young turks. And here you sit in your strange little places, eating Rice-A-Roni. How can you be so out of touch with reality?!? What does it take to destroy these outmoded myths? What does it take? *What does it take?*

JOE L. HENSLEY: Harlan, last night at the Mystery Writers of America banquet it was the same thing. Nobody shows up to accept the awards in the categories. There were some people there from ABC and CBS. But the movie things and so forth were accepted by yucks that nobody ever heard of, or people that had been designated out of the awards committee, and that sort of thing. Same thing.

ELLISON: Yeah, it happens. But the difference is that on the Coast detective novels are not ripped off. They *know* M.W.A. exists.

CLIFFORD SIMAK: But, several times a year I get an offer from the West Coast from the visual media. They want to pay me peanuts. I say to hell with that and then nothing happens. How do you go from there?

ELLISON: Okay, good question, I'll give you an example. Oddly enough, it's Damon Knight again. Damon called me about two weeks ago. He had had an offer from someone...it's a nibble. They all nibble, they love to buy up properties. They like to take options and hope they can blue-sky it somewhere. Even if you've signed the biggest stars in the world, without a property you've got nothing. First came the word. They know that. Banks won't give them a dime. But they

want to blue-sky it. They want to try to build it into something. So they've got to get hold of a property. The name of the game is "Hustle a Cheap Option." So they send off a letter and say, "we're interested in such and such." They don't know where to write you. They write your publisher; they write the Author's League; they write to some magazine in which your story appeared (which usually loses the letter for six months); maybe they find a clue to where or who you are and they write to your agent...if you're very lucky. Or they find you in the telephone book.

So you get an offer from somebody you never heard of (and with all due respect to Joe's point, you probably never heard of them, even if they're big-time and strictly legit, because you all stay totally unknowledgeable about who's who in the film industry; another example of Terminal Provincialism; you know the name of every two-bit editorial twit at semi-moribund magazine markets that can pay you in peanuts, three months after publication, but you're blissfully ignorant of the names of people who could pay off your mortgage or send your kids to college). But, anyhow, you get a letter or a phone call, from a stranger, who says, "We would like to take a two-year option, a 36 month option, a five year option, whatever, on your book, *Don't Step On My Hand*, and we'll offer...whatever." Call it \$500. "We'll offer \$500." Okay, now Damon calls me and he says he had an offer for...God, I don't remember what it was—*The Rithian Terror* or something like that. And these people had been nibbling around him for about a year but nothing was firm. He wanted to read me their offer. So I said read me their offer. And he read me their offer and it was ridiculous. I put him in touch with my agent, Martin Shapiro. Marty called these guys, as a favor to me. He checked them out first with the Motion Picture Producers Association, found out they were legit, but were kind of shaky. Then he called them up and he said here is what an acceptable option deal would be. And they realized they weren't playing mumblety-peg with some amateur, that this was a writer with a knowledgeable Hollywood agent, and they started dealing. The last I heard, Marty got Damon a deal where Damon is getting \$3000 for a six-month option on the material. If they can move it in six months, fine. If not, they lose it, or have to renegotiate and renew, otherwise Damon's made three grand gravy money and he'll get the property back, to option somewhere else. Nothing's lost and he's made the bread.

All of this is very standard, yet somehow it seems bewildering to most of you who otherwise manage your business admirably. How odd! You spend all of your time worrying about the nits and clauses in paperback contracts where you're getting \$1500, but when there's a marketplace offering you *hundreds* of thousands you don't take the

time to learn about it. And it's so damned easy! There are copies of the Writers Guild Minimum Basic Agreement that you can get by simply writing to the Writers Guild in Los Angeles. They'll send it to you for free, or maybe a couple of bucks. And if you read it, you'll understand what your rights are; it's that easy. It may not make you an instant millionaire, but at least you'll have the real data on what kind of money is being spent out there.

And getting *into* the Writers Guild is the easiest thing in the world. It's a very inexpensive guild to belong to and it protects you in a thousand essential ways.

I promise you, people, you will *all*, at one time or another...if you have any talent at *all*...be approached by Hollywood.

How many of you in this room have been approached in some way for television or movies? 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11. Okay, that's eleven of us right here, right now, in a room that's only got thirty or forty people in it.

Almost half of us here, right now; doesn't that tell you that Hollywood's maw is wide open. They're *voracious* out there. They're buying *everything*.†

Coming up this next TV season, there will be something like thirteen hours of prime-time science fiction and fantasy television programmed.

Who will write those segments?

Well, it's not going to be members of Science Fiction Writers of America because *you people* simply don't know what's going on! You don't pay attention; you don't look at the world around you pragmatically; you believe the myths and the bullshit and you refuse to train yourselves to work productively in the real world; you don't take the time and trouble to find out how to write a script. So if *somebody* does get in touch with you...you wind up settling for peanuts, for option money, and they give the script assignment to some halfwitted script hack out there, and he gets the big money, and you spend the next twenty years of your life bitching about how lousy the movie version was, pissing and moaning about Hollywood and passing on more sour grapes mythology to other inept schmucks.

JOE HALDEMAN: Harlan, is it myth-bullshit that we have to live out there in order to get in on all this, or is it true?

ELLISON: It's myth *and* reality. If you want to spend any substantial part of your year doing that kind of work, you have to live out there or you have to commute. Or you have to have a dynamite, aggressive Hollywood agent. Henry Slesar comes out for three months, gets all the work he wants and goes away. Larry McMurtry does the same thing. There are any number of writers who do that. They frequently establish a social relationship in Los Angeles so they can

stay in somebody's house for a week or two, or they find an inexpensive place to live, and they go around during pilot season when the new shows are handing out assignments.

And you make yourself known, you get yourself an agent. It's work. But the payoff, in terms of freedom, is fabulous. The payoff, in terms of buying time to write the books, is incredible. People out there who have done it are doing very, very well at it. It is an area of this business you dare not continue to ignore.

TOM MONTELEONE: When is the best time of the year? What's the pilot season?

ELLISON: Pilot season: they give assignments along about May, June, July, August. Up to July is about right. They show the new pilots along about February, March, April, May. That's when there's nothing being bought. Then the pilots that are scuttled fall out. But during the Spring they firm up the schedules and start making series assignments. Some scripts don't come through, they bomb out and those have to be assigned again...like in July, August, even as late as early September.

Now, of course, it's a different ball game in TV than it's ever been before. It's open season all the time...because they've got a *Second* Season, they've got a *Third* Season. Something dies, they kill it in two weeks, not two months as formerly, and they put in something else. Which means that there are deals going constantly. There are productions being put into work all the time. And movies for TV. And pilots. The dumbest ideas: they love them! They don't know from anything! They want to do shit like *The Man From Atlantis*. You can't believe how moronically uninformed they can be. But I'll give you a classic example:

A guy calls and he's the head of development at CBS. He calls me up and he says come over to the Beverly Hills Hotel and let's have breakfast or cocktails. I don't drink, but I say I'll have a cuppa coffee because I like to look at the hookers at the Beverly Hills Hotel who are the most elegant hookers in the world. And so I go over there and I sit and I listen to this shtumie, and he says "We got us a great idea and we want *you* to write it. It's going to be a Saturday morning series but there's a lot of bread in it and we want you to do it." Already my eyeballs are rolling in my head, but it gets worse; I mean, he hasn't even told me the idea yet! I find out first that the basic concept was devised by Larry Harmon. If you don't know who Larry Harmon is, he's the man who plays Bozo the Clown on television. Actually, it turns out that it wasn't even quite Larry Harmon himself who thought it up. It was Larry Harmon's seven-year-old *son* who came up with the idea. This CBS buffoon tells me it's a *terrific* idea. "The network *loves* it," he assures me, "and they want to go with it. The idea is, there's

this family, see: mother, father, two kids and a dog.” I say, “I think I know that series.” He says, “Now this family goes out in their backyard and they discover a black hole, and they fall into it, and they find a new universe.”

And I sit there and for a few minutes: I’m too stunned to speak. But then I start giggling at him. And he says, “What are you laughing at?” And I say, “I don’t want this to come as a shock to your nervous system, but a black hole *ain’t* a black *hole*.” He says, “What?” I say, “It’s not a black hole. It’s a sun whose matter has collapsed so much that light cannot escape from it, therefore it *looks* like a hole. It swallows everything its immense gravitational pull can affect and crushes it to nothing. If these people walk out into their backyard and find a black hole it will probably swallow *them*, their backyard, the house, the street, the neighborhood, the town, the planet and possibly half the known universe, Nielsen ratings, network and all.” He says, “Well, the network likes it. Isn’t there some way we can do it? No one will know the difference.” So I walk.

That is the level of thinking at which these people work. You know what they need to know. In five seconds any one of you, the worst of you, could come up with a dozen acceptable alternatives to that stupidity I just recounted. You could say: *We have multiple universes and they cross each other and someone falls right through. It’s like a tapestry and there’s a hole in it.* “Oh, a tapestry, a...like in a cloth... yeah, yeah...that’s terrific, very original...”

They are so easily conned, it is unfuckingbelievable. You people are smart enough and clever enough, and need not mumble, as I’ve heard so many of you mumble, “Well, gee whiz, gosh golly, Harlan, *you* can do that sorta thing because you can talk to people. I’m a shmuck, I’m not charismatic.” Okay, you have to *get* charismatic or resign yourself to playing in the bush leagues for Sol Cohen’s pennies.

If you want to continue writing for Ted White for the rest of your natural life, terrific! You’ve got the right to stay stupid. You should live and be well. But don’t call *me* up in the dead of night and want me to save your ass when someone makes you an offer. Which brings me to my final point, and then I’ll answer any other questions you may have.

For the last few years now I’ve been watching this go down. And I’ve watched this organization do virtually nothing for its members of any commercial value. It does silly things for its members. It spends its time in sophomoric arguments, nitpicking bullshit about membership requirements, dues hikes, whether or not Stanislaw Lem is a creep, whether or not there should be an SFWA tie, SFWA membership cards, a secret SFWA handshake, and it elects to high office idiots who think they’re Napoleon. But that was just amateurish silliness and I *did* help

found this organization, so I stayed on.

But I no longer feel that I can be part of an organization that clearly has a death wish this strong.

Therefore, I am resigning from SFWA.

Don't call me no more, 'cause I ain't your "Hollywood liaison" no more. I'm going to pack it in, happily, where SFWA is concerned, and I'm going to do my number out there where no dream is too large or unattainable, and I'm going to get famous and I'm going to get rich, and I'm going to go to England twice a year to see Mike Moorcock, who already knows what I've been saying here.† And the *rest* of you people are going to continue writing for peanuts, and being brutalized, and paying adolescent lip-service to "the sense of wonder" while you continue wearing 1940's clothes and deluding yourselves that you're living in Valhalla because you go to a convention and terminal acne cases come and stroke you.

My resignation will be in the mail, and I will expect a refund on the balance of my dues. This is the last time I will attend an SFWA function. I don't want the stench of failure on my expensive clothes.

FEAR NOT YOUR ENEMIES

This argument for gun control, written shortly after the December, 1980 murder of John Lennon, appeared in the adult fantasy magazine Heavy Metal, which is referenced several times within the piece.

John Lennon's on the menu. The worms are having him for dinner.

It's a fucking banquet: Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy, Luke Easter, Sarai Ribicoff, Stella Walsh, Lyman Bostock, Michael Halberstam, and one hundred and fifty assorted nonentities slaughtered each week, every week, here in our macho democracy. Nonentities, that is, to all but the mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, husbands, wives, children, lovers and friends to whom each of those nonentities meant something.

I'd have included JFK in that list, but we all know *that* executive ticket-punch was part of a giant conspiracy.

And I don't want to bother with pitiful little conspiracies that include only maybe the CIA, the Mafia, the FBI, the Dallas police, Communists and anti-Castro terrorists. That kind of conspiracy is shirred eggs and squashed potatoes. What I like dealing with is the *big* conspiracy, the one *you're* part of.

Thought we didn't know you were high up in the order of the big cabal, didn't you? Thought we didn't notice, right? Well, we noticed; so don't go slobbering over the loss of John Lennon, you cowardly punk. Don't beat your breast as you stand out there in the cold behind the NYPD sawhorses across the street from the Dakota, kiddo. We're on to you, and as far as I'm concerned you're as guilty as Mark David Chapman of pumping those four shots into Lennon's back.

You didn't cry for 69-year-old ex-Olympic star Stella Walsh on December 4th when some sonofabitch left her face-down in the parking lot of a discount department store on Cleveland's near East side, wiping out the 65 track records she set in her extremely worthy lifetime. You didn't cry when Luke Easter was blown away on March 29, 1979 outside the Cleveland Trust; probably because you didn't give a shit that that old black man hit twenty-five homeruns in two months in 1949 and played a lot of first base for the Indians. You didn't cry for twenty-three year old Sarai Ribicoff, senselessly shot to death in the course of a petty holdup outside Chez Helene in LA's Venice section; most likely because she was Senator Abe Ribicoff's niece *and* a Jew *and* a newspaper reporter and hell, that's three strikes

right there; no pity for the rich, the powerful, the vocal and the members of the International Money Conspiracy. And you're probably only wailing over Lennon because it's in the air and gives you a chance to vent some of your fear and frustration. But you belong to the big cabal, chum, and we see through your disingenuous sorrow.

You started your membership sucking up the BB gun ads in copies of *The Incredible Hulk* and *Batman* comics. You paid dues every time you sat in a movie theater and watched the fever-sick violence dreams of *Dressed To Kill* or *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and went down the line proclaiming twisted crap like that "high art" as do some of our more prominently brain-damaged film critics. You rose in the ranks every time you accepted the eloquent vocabulary of a bullet in the gut or a punch in the mouth as the final statement of any argument on *Starsky & Hutch* or *Charlie's Angels*. So now you're a fully-paid-up, card-carrying psychotic dotting on the wonderful full-color panels in *Heavy Metal* that show some poor slob with his head blown apart like a casaba melon. And you're as much against gun control as our soon-to-be-installed Chief Executive, Mr. Reagan. And you know what *he* said, mere hours after Chapman's Charter Arms .38 special had *its* say? Well, Ronnie said: "I've never believed that gun control laws would help reduce violence. I believe in the kind of legislation we had in California. If somebody commits a crime and carries a gun when doing it, add five to fifteen years to the prison sentence."

I'm glad so many of you voted for that kind of asshole thinking. Mr. Reagan's terrific use-a-gun-go-to-jail law is so effective that Los Angeles has become Murder City: homicides for the first ten months of 1980 were over 800 in the city proper and over 1500 in the county.

Reagan, you crepuscular old fart, what the hell is wrong with you!?! Who gives a damn how long Chapman lies up in the slam? *Lennon* is dead, you puddingbrain. *Dead*. Revenge don't beat the bulldog. Chapman wasn't some amoral mugger making his living in the streets ripping off wallets and tv sets. He was a nut. Like all the other nuts who commit a murder every 24 minutes, night and day, every day of the year in this country. When the hell will you read the statistics, Reagan? When will you realize that over fifty per cent of all the gun slayings every year are committed not by the dreaded composite darkie-mestizo-latino alley killer but by friends and relatives, by angry lovers and total strangers when you screwed them out of a parking space or gave them the finger in a moving car. Fifty per cent and more: stupid accidents where a ten-year-old kid sprays his brain matter across the bedroom wall playing with Daddy's surrogate penis, the bureau drawer Luger; heat of passion arguments in which your girl friend opens up your stomach so your intestines start unwinding on the carpet like a Duneworld sandworm; deadly

misunderstandings like the one that killed baseball star Lyman Bostock, a case of mistaken identity that didn't mean a damn because Bostock was on the menu.

How about that, gentle reader, out there crying because Lennon bit the dust, how about that you're a member of the big conspiracy headed by Uncle Ronnie? You like the tag?

Don't give me no shit about how *you* ain't in on it, Chuckles. You're *in* on it! Because if you weren't, you'd be doing something about it, instead of sitting there on your ass growing lesions on your brain watching television and putting all that good dope up your snout and reading half-witted sci-fi trash and eating junk food till you're too lazy to get out of the chair to take a dump. If you *weren't* part of the conspiracy to keep the National Rifle Association one of the biggest goddam lobbies in Washington, you'd be sending all your spare cash to Handgun Control, a *citizens'* lobby in Washington.

And don't hide behind that god-fearing gobbledegook, either. I've had it up to here with Rev. Jerry Falwell and Ernest Angely and Billy Graham and all the rest of those TV clowns perverting the tenets of the Judeo-Christian ethos with their non-specific mumble about moral rectitude. They want to censor books and movies and tv and magazines to fit some ancient worn-out idea of purity, but all those fundamentalist millions who'll deluge a sponsor with vengeful letters because some model exposed her thigh in an advertisement won't lift a finger or a buck to beat the NRA lobby at its own game. And *you* know why; because all those Christ-shouters own guns...or if they don't, they actually believe that the Constitution gives any dip who can sign his or her name to a handgun application the right to own a .357 magnum.

I do not think it coincidence that Mark David Chapman was into flying saucers, acid, Jesus worship, pistol-firing tests, and cultism. The moment the news flash broke in on the radio, the night Lennon was shot, I said to Jane, "You watch: he'll turn out to be a Christer." And sure enough.

Because that's all the same game.

It's removal from reality. And only a step or two from "Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord" to seeing oneself as the instrument of that vengeance. Who knows what leper's soup steams in Chapman's cauldron of a brain? And who cares? If he hadn't been able to get a gun in Hawaii so easily, he might not have been able to get Lennon so simply. Yeah, I know: he could have knifed him, garrotted him, hit him with a 2×4. But not from five feet away. Yeah, people kill people...with guns.

I have no tears in me for John Lennon. I've used them all up on King and Kennedy and a woman I once loved who was raped and then

murdered—with a handgun—in the parking lot of a bowling alley in the San Fernando Valley.

So you can dry your public show of misery, li'l heavymetal babies. When it's fashion time for roller disco or cowboy boots or electronic wargaming or freebasing or whatever the panhandlers have in store to separate you from your bucks next season, you'll forget. And you'll renew membership in the big conspiracy.

Let me leave you with these words from the Polish poet Edward Yashinsky, who survived a Nazi prison camp only to die in a Russian one. "Fear not your enemies, for they can only kill you; fear not your friends, for they can only betray you. Fear only the indifferent, who permit the killers and betrayers to walk safely on the earth."

And don't write me no shitty letters telling me how *concerned* you are and how dare I defame all the good li'l heavymetal babies out there with Teflon'd nostrils who simply *abhor* violence. Send some money to Handgun Control in Washington, punk.

Or cop to being one of the indifferent members of the big conspiracy that killed John Lennon. Goo goo goo joob.

Or, as John once wrote: *Happiness is a warm gun.*

FACE-DOWN IN GLORIA SWANSON'S SWIMMING POOL

Los Angeles has been profoundly important to Harlan and he has a great deal of affection for the city. This paean of praise appeared in Los Angeles magazine in August 1978, and Harlan seems to remember having approached them about writing it. This is just one of many pieces about Los Angeles which he has published in that magazine over the years.

By the eleventh day of the Ohio lecture tour I was drawing big, sprawling crowds of students. The auditorium of Wittenburg College in Springfield was jammed, right up to the balcony. (Where, later in the evening's festivities, a Jesus Freak would leap up, scream that I was "the Antichrist, doing the Devil's Work," flick her Bic, set fire to her Little Orphan Annie hair, and rush out of the auditorium with her friends beating at her head.) It was Wednesday, October 3rd, 1973 and I had been a resident of Los Angeles for eleven years.

There I stood on the platform in Springfield, Ohio—dead in the center, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, of the geographic belt of greatest density of air pollution in the United States—and this kid with rheumy eyes, sallow skin, pustules and running sores yells up from the audience, "How can you live in Los Angeles with all that pollution?"

And I look down at him, and I hear myself saying, "Are you kidding, running that kinda okeydoke past me? You live in the same state with Dayton, top of the Clean Air Commission's Pure Death Locale chart. How can I live in Elay? It's easy, brother! I look out my living room window through the saddle of the Santa Monica Mountains, fifteen miles straight across the San Fernando Valley to the San Gabriel range, and three hundred out of every three hundred and sixty-five days of the year I can see those mountains...sometimes as clear as if they were in my backyard, sometimes fuzzily...but I see 'em! I was in downtown Springfield today, and I couldn't see the bank building on the corner of the next block!

"In Los Angeles, in the space of a week, I can talk to Randy Newman, Ray Bradbury, Howard Fast, Carol Connors, Bucky Fuller, Gunther Schiff, Ralph Bakshi, Dorothy Fontana, Louise Farr, Richard Dreyfuss, Richard Matheson, Christopher Knopf, Richard Brooks and Michael Crichton. I'd have talked to people here in Springfield today, but I couldn't pry them loose from their television sets!

"In Los Angeles I can eat lomito saltado at Macchu Picchu,

moussaka vegetarian at Mischa's, sizzling rice three-flavor soup at Golden China, beef mole at Antonio's, zucchini florentine at Musso & Frank's, besuga al horno at La Masia, steamed clams and abalone steak at Mel's Landing, the best barbeque this side of the House of Blue Lights at Dr. Hogly Wogly's Tyler Texas Pit BBQ, the Poliakov Special at Chez Puce, Mont Blanc at the Paprika and a terrific noodle kuchel at Hamburger Hamlet. I went out for a bite to eat here in Springfield and had to arm-wrestle the waitress at the Toddle House best two-out-of-three to get my cheeseburger well-done without any mayonnaise on it!

"In Los Angeles I've got my choice of a thousand different bookstores from A Change of Hobbit where they stock every science fiction book since Lucian of Samosata to Boulevard Books and The Scene of the Crime where I can find Cornell Woolrich and Richard Stark and Anthony Boucher if I feel like a little mayhem. Needham Bookfinders and Barry Levin and Pickwick and World Book & News on Cahuenga are regular watering-holes for me. I have 37,000 books in my house and I need a ten-book-a-day fix just to keep me going. Here in Springfield, if I need something to pass the interminable evenings, the best I can do is inspirational literature left in the motel desk or go to the A&P for one of those 'Love's Tender Fury' abominations.

"In Los Angeles..."

And I stopped.

The implausability of it hit me like an 18-wheeler on the Grapevine. Here I was, a refugee from (ironically) Ohio, dragged by the nose to Los Angeles eleven years earlier, hating the mere thought of living in the town that had killed Scott Fitzgerald, swearing I'd be back in New York inside a month...more than a decade later standing on a lecture platform in (ironically) *Ohio*, running a Chamber of Commerce panegyric to the wonders and deliciousness of the City of Angels.

What hath God wrought? I thought. *Without even noticing, I've become an Angeleno!*

When my New York literary agent, Bob Mills, said to me in 1961, "You've got to go to California. You'll never be able to live the way you want to live, and be free to write what you want to write, unless you crack films and make enough during the year to buy free time for writing the books," when he said that to me, the first image that flooded into my head was William Holden, lying face-down in Gloria Swanson's swimming pool in *Sunset Boulevard*.

And washing right along behind that vision were all the ghastly scenes from *Day of the Locust*, *The Loved One*, *What Makes Sammy Run*,

The Slide Area, The Big Knife, The Last Tycoon and *Flash and Filigree*. I conjured up rampaging nightmares of good writers clubbed to their knees—as I had always believed—by Hollywood: Horace McCoy, Dashiell Hammett, Fitzgerald, Nathanael West, Dorothy Parker. And I shivered with fear.

“No, no,” I pleaded, “don’t make me go to Los Angeles! I’ll turn into a pillar of Waldo Salt! My hair’s too fine to take a blond rinse, and I can’t even ice skate, how the hell you think I’m gonna learn to surf?”

And always, Bill Holden as that indigent Hollywood screenwriter, Joe Gillis, spreadeagled and waterlogged in Norma Desmond’s befoiled swimming pool. What a horrendous metaphor!

But I was chivvied into coming. And eleven years later I stood on a platform in Ohio and said, “And even if all that good stuff weren’t true of only Los Angeles, even if you had it all here...I’d still be in *L.A.*, man, and you’d still be in Springfield!”

And now it is sixteen years since I motored into Hollywood with ten cents in my pocket, driving a ’51 Ford that was gasping its last, and I am here to tell you: this is a *dynamite* town.

I’ve lived all over the place. Painesville, Ohio; Louisville, Kentucky; New York; Chicago; New Orleans; Shelby, North Carolina; Paris and London. And while London is a fast second-place to this burg, if I were to rummage around in the stock of America’s leading Art Deco dealer, H. Frank Jones (who just *happens* to be right here in Los Angeles), and came up with an original Lalique magic lamp, and rubbed it to bring up the patina, and out came this dyspeptic genie who’d grant me any wish I desired, I wouldn’t ask him to let me live anywhere but here!

Los Angeles is the cutting edge of the culture, despite the claims and pretensions of San Francisco and New York and Boston and Washington. It has all the verve and dynamism that I found in New York when I went there in 1950. Verve and dynamism that New York has lost, that Chicago wanted and for which substituted brutality and angst, that New Orleans is afraid to let loose. For me, L.A. is like a big, gauche baby with a shotgun in its mouth. It’ll do *anything*. And with more style, with more fire, with more Errol Flynn go-to-hell vivacity than any other city I’ve ever experienced.

As for what L.A. does to an artist, it’s all bullshit about the death of creativity, out here in the vanilla sunshine. In sixteen years I’ve written nineteen books, a dozen movies and more television than I care to think about, even now that I’ve renounced that lousy medium. Everything that’s made a reputation for me...I wrote while living here...or on the way back to here. If Fitzgerald bought the plot while out here, it was because he did it to himself. Oh, it’s easy enough to go

for the sparkle and the dazzle (hell, I even worked for Aaron Spelling for a little while), but anyone who wants to work out here can find the most salutary environment in the world.

Is it slower than New York? That's what a few visitors from the Apple tell me. As I dance circles around them, watching them sneer and badmouth in slow-motion. The hours are longer here, the moments fuller, and no one would tolerate for a moment out here the kind of three-hour business lunches they take in Manhattan. This is a working town. Ask Betsy Pryor or Phil Mishkin or Larry Niven.

And when they talk about whacko, back East, and they say L.A. is Cloud-Cuckoo-Land, I smile. Because all that weirdness is upstate in San Francisco. Sure, we get our occasional dingbats like Charlie Manson and the Hillside Strangler, but have you noticed, they're always schmucks who've come here from somewhere else and never really integrated? Is L.A. all plastic, without soul? Sure, if you come to visit and stay in Garden Grove or go to Anaheim. But if you want soul, just drive down to Watts and look at that testament to one human being's indomitability and creative purpose, the Towers of Simon Rodia. Soul? I'll give you soul: Pink's hot dogs, better than Nathan's; the Century City riot against the War in Vietnam; Prop 13 and that incredible old curmudgeon Howard Jarvis; Kent Bash's paintings; Jeremy Tarcher's regional success as a publisher against all the odds; Gypsy Boots; Art Kunkin and Brian Kirby's days at the *Free Press*; the best rye bread and cocoanut rum bars in the world at Brown's Victory Bakery; Auracle playing at Dante's; living in Laurel Canyon; kids streaming down from Pepperdine to help Burgess Meredith save his house at Malibu when the Pacific opened its maw; the Beverly Glen art fair every year.

Sixteen years, and every time I get off a plane at LAX, having been out there somewhere else, I find myself grinning and saying, "Thank God I'm home." An Angeleno. How 'bout that.

And I even met Gloria Swanson once. She was charming and warm and thoroughly magnificent. But, uh, old fears die hard; and I somehow didn't follow up on her invitation to come and visit at her home. I don't even know if she's *got* a swimming pool.

FROM ALABAMA, WITH HATE: ANOTHER MEMO FROM PURGATORY

This account of Harlan's participation in the famous March on Montgomery appeared in the September 1965 issue of Knight magazine. It exemplifies his longstanding willingness to put his body on the line in order to get a story. As Harlan remarked recently, sometimes even he doesn't know which comes first—the desire to write authentically, or his personal love of action—and at this point he doesn't much care.

Thursday, March 25th, 1965. A walk through the country of the blind. Montgomery, Alabama—stinking in the heat of its own decay; sweltering in the viciousness of two hundred years of murder and bigotry and moral wretchedness; poised with the invisible artifacts of its hooded aristocracy: the hemp lynch rope, the 12-gauge shotgun, the befouled “separate but equal” toilet, the electric cattle prod, the killer caravans by night and the final paycheck by day.

Poised, waiting for the outsiders to come.

The 25th of March. Fifty thousand people walking the red-mud roads of Alabama, singing; the outsiders, come to tell a crazed bigot that the Civil War was long dead, that a house divided was soon to topple, that the stain of evil that Alabama had become would no longer be tolerated in a *United States*.

The Freedom March on Montgomery, Alabama.

A biased report.

There must have been noble motives in there, somewhere. I simply couldn't think of any. Plainly, it was time to go. It was time to stop all the parlor liberalism, to stop all the highflown clucking about heinous crimes and rotten living conditions; it was time to act. Time to pay some dues. It was *mea culpa* time, and everyone was guilty. So I went. Along with thousands from all over the country, all over the world. Every state was there, New Mexico, Indiana, New York, Florida, Ohio. Decent men and women from Hawaii, France, London, Alaska. A blind man who had walked from Georgia. A wealthy matron in furs from Beverly Hills. A one-legged hero, who walked with the Original Three Hundred, all the way from Selma where men had died just days before, to Montgomery, where a despicable racist flew the Confederate flag as a gesture of defiance, and hid behind locked doors.

This time we weren't alone. This time the Great White Father in the Great White House had spoken. He'd called together a joint session of Congress—usually reserved for State of the Union addresses and national emergencies—and he had said it for all of us. A little late, a little slow, but he'd finally said it, he'd called Wallace's bluff:

"The time of justice has now come," Lyndon B. Johnson said. "No force can hold it back." At last, for every thick red neck in the state of Alabama to hear and believe, the tide of history was being acknowledged. In a matter of hours it would begin to wash over the face of Alabama as the 50-mile trek from Selma to Montgomery was begun, and Johnson told them why: "Should we defeat every enemy, double our wealth, conquer the stars and still be unequal to this issue, then we will have failed as a people and as a nation."

He spoke for forty-five minutes, and he was interrupted by standing ovations thirty-nine times. "We shall overcome," he told them. But those were just words. Words had lifted on the air many times before. And still, the Reverend James J. Reeb had died under the clubs of thugs called police. Words had flown and yet three civil rights workers were found buried twenty-one feet beneath a Mississippi damn (sic.). Like doves, the words had lifted on the breeze, and in Birmingham little children were bombed in Sunday School. Even since the march, even after all the words words words, a Detroit woman was senselessly gunned down on that same road between Selma and Montgomery. Viola Liuzzo was another numbered corpse.

Damn them! Damn their twisted, stunted, warped minds, their rotten and corrupted beliefs, the frenzied and hideous *doppelgangers* of Hitler's storm troopers. Even after they saw fifty thousand men and women flock to their sinkhole of a state to plead with their bodies and their time to let those people go, even so, still, with all the words, they killed again. And again. And it seems it will never stop till time has closed over the head of Man and he is no more, sunk in the ocean of forgetfulness, when there is no black, there is no white, there is no Man at all!

All this talk of Man, and on that march, so much talk of God. But where was God for the little church girls of Birmingham? Where was God for Reverend Reeb? For Mrs. Liuzzo? For all the nameless and never-known black men whose bodies have been burned and strung from ropes and violated by razor and knife and gun? Where is this God who allows hate to rule a land? I can't talk of God, I can only talk of Man.

For all I saw on that Montgomery march was man, at his most noble, at his most degraded. If you want specifics, if you need background, if you need history, it's all been recorded. This, damn them, is a personal record.

The planes left from Burbank. Three planes from the Lockheed Airport where Bogart said farewell to Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*. Three hundred clerics, students, actors, housewives, ribbon clerks, writers, truck drivers and poets. They had at first thought one plane would be sufficient, but two days before we were to leave, they had to lay on a second, and earlier that Thursday, a third. And still they were turning them away. The waiting room was a madhouse, people cramming against the check-in desk, don't leave me behind! Why were they fighting so hard to go? Why were they not taking this handy cop-out to avoid possible danger? Men and women who, if they had had their druthers, would gladly have gone home to bed, or to a discotheque. They fought and shoved to give their money for the flight. I was in the midst of them. I cannot answer the question.

Yet, on the plane, jammed together with total strangers, even though we were of one united cause, I felt an alienation: I was suddenly assailed by a strange and terrible thought. All these people, on this flight, flying toward brotherhood—

What if we crashed, or were marooned somewhere, and there was no food save what we had brought in our knapsacks? Wouldn't we start pummeling that dapper Negro gentleman up front there, the one with the bag of fruit? Where would be all our brotherhood then?

And I realized: the frenzy at the check-in counters, the surly shoving, the being herded together...

That was real! That was people.

What we were flying toward, silent and unknown...what we believed in...what we were going to do...*that* was a thought. In a frightening and inescapable way, it did not exist. And I knew, *really*: these people did not have to like each other, or love each other; they were all aliens, moving toward a dream.

But dreams cannot be populated. Only hard realities can know presence. And I felt alone.

For down there in Montgomery, Alabama, was the reality. This was the dream, and the fact that it did not exist terrified me. The ones who lived in that state, did so *all* the time, not just for a day, or a week, and then away to the hills of Hollywood where there was safety; and I grew cold thinking that we were about to invade their reality.

We were to meet the original Three Hundred who had hiked the full fifty miles on U.S. Highway 80 out of Selma. All the marchers from everywhere who had come to this spot, were to meet three miles outside the city limits, at the City of St. Jude, a hospital and school.

My first glimpse of it was chilling, for surely this must have been the impression given to the condemned of Europe when first they glimpsed Dachau or Buchenwald. Outside a high cyclone fence, members of the federalized Alabama National Guard (the Dixie [31st] Division) stood at parade-rest every fifty feet. Inside that fence, the bivouac area seemed somehow—wrong. The grounds were clotted with great clumps of people, two and three hundred in a bunch, ragtag, disordered. Mud was everywhere. The thick, sucking red mud of Alabama had been churned to cream by thousands of feet walking over it endlessly since the day before. It was a concentration camp. Those soldiers, they weren't turned outward, to protect the people inside...

Once we were inside, I tried asking the troopers two questions. I walked across the empty corner far away from all the waiting people, and approached three standing together. Two walked away. "At what intervals have they spaced you out around the fence?" I asked.

"Ah don' know."

"Are you elements of the federalized Alabama Guard?"

"Ah don' know."

Then *he* moved away. I stared after him. God save us from men who do what they despise doing, simply because they are ordered to do it.

Later, I was to understand even more clearly my fear and horror at these Southerners pressed into a service of hatred, for the only moment of genuine danger I knew came from them.

We were to have started marching the last three miles into Montgomery and the Capitol Building at 9:00. It was eleven before we moved. Stacked up in long lines, eight abreast, we stood in the mud, waiting, and then it started to rain. It misted down on us, and the umbrellas came out, the scudgy raincoats that had been jammed in knapsacks and bedrolls. A sound truck nearby suddenly began blaring...a Negro comic who did lousy impressions...and he wouldn't stop...he just kept imitating Wallace, FDR, Ralph Bunche, LBJ, Dr. Paul Tillich, and every few *shticks* were interspersed with snarling references to how "whitey" was a sonofabitch. It was ill-timed, in bad taste. All of us who had come to do what we could, to serve, to offer ourselves without any of the usual white man's impetuosity to run things. We stood there, and the comic rasped at us, till there were murmurings of marching not on the capitol, but on the sound truck.

Then the Original Three Hundred in their fluorescent orange road-workers jackets, bearing American flags, began moving out, and with a sense of elation just to be afoot, we moved out after them. Wave after wave, rank upon rank, little children clutching hands, women still carrying their brown paper bags of food, black men and white

men, all teeth and flashing eyes, moving out onto the Jefferson Davis Highway. Sporadic singing broke out. We'd been on our feet four hours now. Ahead of me, one-legged Jim Letherer of Saginaw, Michigan crutch-propelled himself forward, grinning.

A group of Montgomery teen-agers had fastened themselves to a small knot of us from Los Angeles, and as we marched, for the first time we heard their songs:

"In your heart you know
you're wrong...
In your heart you know
you're wrong...
In your heart you know
you're wrong...
In Montgomery, Ala-bam-a!"

And followed by a chant to which The Jerk could be danced. It was a strange, demanding chant—Hoop-de-hoop...hoop-de-hoop...hoop-de-hoop—and then a dire, threatening, challenging Uh. Uh. Uh. Uh. Uh. It was the old strike-breaker's chant, warning and intimidating. We're coming. We're waiting for you. We *want* you to try something...go ahead...break out that cane and cattle prod, this time *we'll* see who gets a split skull hoop-de-hoop hoop-de-hoop. Uh. Uh. Uh. Uh. Uh.

The march went down U.S. 80 and into the Negro section.

Picture every cliché of poverty and sadness. Let them steep in the cauldron of your most imaginative thoughts. They cannot approach the reality of the squalor in which the black men and women of Montgomery, Alabama live. Houses that have never seen paint, grey slatboard houses without foundations, where it isn't necessary to use a dust-pan after sweeping: the dirt falls through the cracks in the floor. Where wallpaper is made of newspaper, and you can stand inside that crackerbox and feel the March wind whistle chilly in at you. There were few fat people. There was a total absence of the treasured bigot's cliché: "They live in filth, but they all got big Caddys." There were no Caddys. But there *were* desiccated old men sitting on porch steps wearing clean but threadbare clothes. There *were* tiny children with their heads bound up in silk stockings to make "the kink lie back." There *were* filthy open sewers in front of every house, because the municipal government didn't see any need for adequate sewage disposal. There *were* shockingly inadequate shopping facilities—little stores with their inevitable Coca-Cola signs that said JOHN'S GRO. under the advertisement. The only things in that section that were sharp and fresh-looking, the Coca-Cola signs. God bless American industry, the pervasive love of the Corporation!

A roadside sight: ten little tiny children, scrupulously clean, clapping their little hands and singing in small bird voices as a ten-thousand-year-old Negro man with a cane led them in "We Shall Overcome." And no smiles on their faces.

The smiling was all being done in the marching column. By the roadside, Negroes who were terrified they would be burned out, lynched or lose their jobs if they marched (as subsequent days have revealed to be accurate guesstimates), watched silently. From porches and sidewalks—euphemism for cracked bits of pale rock—they stared at the endless stream of humanity come to pledge allegiance to their cause. And as the chanting, singing masses moved past, they would suddenly burst into a moment of hand-clapping or singing, then realize Fear had settled behind them, watching, and they would subside again. It was eerie, and tragic.

A toothless old woman, lushed out of herself, ran alongside the column, chattering merrily. She grabbed at me, tried to pull me out of the line, tried to hug me, just out of sheer delight that we existed, that we were there. "C'mon in, old mother! C'mon in, there's room!" yelled Paul Robbins, the photographer who had gone down to Alabama with me. Everybody laughed, and capered, and she clapped her withered hands in childlike abandon. We passed her by, and she smiled gap-mouthed at others, who borrowed her sunshine.

A Montgomery high school girl marching beside me pointed to a beat-up commercial building with the sign LAICOS CLUB on it. "That's where we get to go for music," she said. It was a simple statement, but it was filled with hatred. That was the *one* place they were allowed to go. We turned a corner in the red mud and suddenly better pavement began.

The lower middle-class white neighborhood. The perceptible transition from Nigger Town to Po' White Trash.

It was only a cultural half-step up from the shameful ghetto we had just left, but here we found the most vicious attitude of all...

[When I was in the army, stationed in Georgia, I once had a dirt-dumb White Trash PFC explain something to me. "I'm poor," he said bitterly, "real poor, as poor as y'c'n get. And I got no education, and I got nothin' back home but gettin' laid an' gettin' old. I ain't better than nothin', man, nothin' at all. I'm just about as bad as mud, but there's one thing I'm better than...I'm better than a nigger, and I intends to see it stays that way." Nutshell explanation of the Southern States Rights argument against Civil Rights.]

On a porch, a man and his wife, sipping tea, blissfully unaware of a freedom march. Their world was up there. And down on that road, there wasn't *nothin'* happening. There ain't nothing going on down here in Alabama, they said over television the preceding Sunday.

Nothin' atall. What the hell did he think all that going on down on the road was? Locust?

Past a Negro school. Children hanging out of windows, screaming jubilantly, urging us forward, teachers waving, crying with joy, give 'em hell! The name of the school in bold letters: LOVELESS SCHOOL. Yeah.

Around a corner. Up on the verandah of a resident hotel, a gaggle of middle-class white women, the cream of Southern womanhood.

"Nigger-lovers!" the blonde screamed, harried.

"Mother fu—" the words were drowned out by the chants of the "lower class" Negro marchers, "Go tell George Wallace, go tell George Wallace, go tell George Wallace, ain't no one gonna turn me around..."

The third woman was so overcome with hate and the bubbling inarticulateness of the need to see us all dead, corpses strewn from one end of US 80 to the other, that all she could do was turn her backside to us, wiggle, and pretend to be breaking wind.

"You got nothin' but class, madame," I yelled. "K-L-A-Z." And we went past. Frightened? No, not then.

I wanted a glass of water. The sun had come out, and it was hot. "Christ, I'd like a glass of water," I murmured. "Why don't you go up on that porch and ask them white folks?" one of the kids giped, a student from Tuskegee.

I grinned back at him. "Will it cause trouble for the march?" He shook his head. "No, but it gonna cause trouble for you."

I loped off out of the line as everyone in the vicinity passed the message; the white boy's goin' up to ask for a glassa water...he'll never get it.

Behind me, the column slowed and halted, jamming up as everyone watched, waiting for trouble, almost anxious for it, perhaps. Down the street, at the resident hotel, the klaz women craned over the railing to see what was happening. I trotted up to the front steps of the house. There were three women sitting there in chairs. "Excuse me, ma'am," I said to the fat one, "might I trouble you for a glass of water, please." She stared at me uncomprehendingly. What the hell was this Northern Jewish Communist asking her? She didn't speak, couldn't speak? "A glass of water, ma'am?" I repeated.

The redhead next to her leaned over. "He says he wants a glass of water. Please." The fat one heaved herself out of the chair, went inside the screen door. The redhead came over to me.

"We aren't all as bad as they tell you we are down here," she said, and seemed infinitely, genuinely sad about it.

"As bad as what, ma'am?" I asked, playing boyish and cute.

"Well, just like, you know, them others, like they tell you."

"Who tells me, ma'am?"

"You know. We just aren't *all* that bad, honest."

"Yes ma'am." I smiled at her. "But some of you are, and if you sit back and let them ruin your lovely state, then you're as guilty as they are. I came all the way from Hollywood, ma'am, just to see if I could help." She stared at me. I'd used a magic word. Hollywood. Then I wasn't a Communist. A black-loving Jew, probably, but not a Communist. And I had such *nice* manners, and I obviously wasn't a beatnik. The fat one came out with the water. I took a long, deep pull from the kitchen glass and returned it. "Thank you, very very much, ma'am," I said and smiled, allowing the left-cheek dimple to show itself.

"You just tell 'em we gave you a glass of water." The redhead smiled, thinking she was sewing it up.

And if I'd been black? I thought. I didn't say it, because the idea was to show them there were other ways to do it, not to antagonize them. I loped back to the line of marchers and fell in, the line moved out again, and I repeated what had been said. They weren't all that bad down here. The Negro student turned a look of venom and truth on me, "Don't you fall for that okey-dokey," he warned me.

Hoop-de-hoop. Uh. Uh. Uh. Uh.

We turned down onto the main drag. Dexter Street. Past the Jeff Davis Hotel. The whites standing at every curb, and the rednecks, the denim-clad, white-shirted men, giving us the finger. "Where you want freedom from, boy?" a redneck murmured at me from the sidelines. "New York? Philadelphia? Chicago?" I smiled at him...frig you, Jack.

Past the Paramount Theatre. Elvis Presley in *Girl Happy*. "That isn't one of ours," the Negro high school girl said. My heart went cold in me. It's so easy to forget.

Past the J.J. Newberry five and dime. The second floor housed the Montgomery Citizens Council offices. They had a gigantic poster hanging out the window. It showed Martin Luther King with some other people, and it said MARTIN LUTHER KING / COMMUNIST!

Hoop-de-hoop. Hoop-de-hoop.

A white waitress in a restaurant, peering out of the window at me. I smiled at her, winked. She grinned back. We flirted. If I wanted to stay down here for a few days, I could spread the gospel, seed the populace, lift that barge, tote that bale.

The upstairs window of the Pontiac Agency. A man in a grey suit. "Go back where you come from, you mammy-jammin' nigger-lovin' sonsabitches...y'goddam..." Ah, South'n hospitality.

The kids behind us were doing a freedom chant to a tune that was ready-made for The Jerk. There was dancing in Dexter Street. Another

dance. The Twine. And a third. The Shotgun. Yeah!

The last lap. As we came down to the bottom of the hill that led up to the end of the square and the Capitol, someone pointed and yelled. Atop the Capitol Building. No American flag. The Alabama State Flag, crossed diagonal red bars on a white field. And underneath: the stars and bars of the Confederacy. Governor George, Governor George, how does your arrogance grow? With shotgun shells and lynch mob yells, and flauntings of America, all in a row!

We listened to the speeches, all of them. They droned on for hours, and in the parlance of show biz, they “lost their audience”. But it didn’t matter, we were with them all the way. They could have recited “Jabberwocky.” Until Jimmy Baldwin introduced King. Baldwin had once had training as a preacher. It told. Shadrach and his kin went to the furnace once more, and from the heat came Martin Luther King, who said all there was to say. We had stood there, slumped there, lain there, sitting thousand upon thousand while the Army spotters on the rooftops stared down at us—

Put a machine gun up there on the Montgomery Safety Building, another on the roof of the facing office building, and a third set of two cross-rigged in the Capitol Building, and just track across, spraying, and we could spread them nigger-loving bastards curb to curb in their own blood.

—and Wallace’s head thug, Al Lingo, moved around the crowd, incognito. We were pigeons, had Wallace wanted to pull another Sharpesville Massacre. Added to it was the fact that those “protecting” Alabama National Guardsmen (with their flag of the Confederacy sewn over the heart above the US Army patch) were all facing *inward*, not outward. Protection?

Footnote: I submit it was a calculated bit of strategy, mobilizing the Dixie Division. Whether as a subliminal punishment—having to guard the very people who threatened their way of life—or as a warning to the invaders that down under that khaki even the troopers were Wallace’s Boys. Whichever, let it herewith be noted that every one of them was gimlet-eyed, beast-faced, thick-necked, jaws twitching with restrained fury as King lacerated their Alabama bigotry.

And the singing...God, the singing! Fifty thousand, led by Belafonte. George was hiding up in the Capitol, peeking through the Venetian blinds. I wonder if Governor George enjoyed the entertainment as much as he had the darkies singin’ in de moonlight?

Behind me, inside the sawhorse barricades, I heard an old Negro man and his wife talking. “It ain’t never gonna be the same here again,” he said.

His wife shook her head. "They ain't gonna lay down and die." Bitter realism, in the midst of a dream.

He shrugged, gently repeating, "Still, ain't never gonna be the same here again."

I pulled out a salami and a water bottle from the knapsack. Then I remembered the water bottle was empty, and borrowed one from James Goldstone, a television director who had felt it was time to pay some dues. We cut up the salami and passed it around. One of the Negro kids grinned: "Kosher?" "It was when we left L.A.," Goldstone said and leered. We all ate, and passed the water bottle. The Negroes would not drink after the white folk. Old horrors die slowly.

When it was over, we were directed to an empty lot where buses were supposed to come to get us, to shuttle us back to the Montgomery airport for the flight home. I had wanted to stay down several days, to see what the aftermath would be like, but they pleaded with everyone to cut out, quickly. Perhaps they knew something like what was waiting for Viola Liuzzo might befall us.

We waited in the empty lot a long, long time, three hundred and more of us. The buses did not come. The troops were spaced out all along behind us, threatening, menacing. "I want a Coke," I said to Paul Robbins. There was a gas station two blocks down. "Jeezus, don't go down there!" someone warned. There was no fear, somehow. We started walking down.

As we passed the lines of army troops, they began clicking the safety catches off their old M-1 rifles. Stupid bastards, were they trying to scare us? I knew they had no ammunition in those pieces. They weren't even wearing clip holders for spare ammo. Stupid bastards. And they muttered underbreath:

"Nigger lover."

"Go back where you come from, sonofabitch fuc—"

And one, as I passed, trying to get to the gas station, stepped out with rifle at port arms. "Where you from, boy?" he demanded. I stared at him coldly. "I'm from New York, and I'm a Colonel in the United States Army Reserve, *boy*, and if you don't want me to call your C.O. over and have him put you on charges for speaking to me, you'd better get your ass back in formation, trooper! Jump!" And he got back, and muttered surlily, "Y'gotta go around."

We walked down to the corner. I had to use the toilet. The white ones were full, both men and women. So I used the "separate but equal" facilities maintained for COLORED. I was white. That's a color.

The station owner had a thrombosis. We bought our Cokes and started back. They had closed off the street. You have to go around. Three blocks North, three blocks West, three blocks South. *Now* I was scared.

There were five of us. We started back toward the empty lot by that circuitous route, which had been predicated for no discernible reason. The others scampered. I was damned if I'd let those muthuhs rattle me around. I sauntered. "Why hurry?" I asked the Negro member of the group. "'Cause I can't spend the night in the Jeff Davis Hotel," he said. A telling point. I scampered.

Cars and panel trucks slithered by, with obscenities hurled out at us. "We gonna get you tonight you buncha—" We got back to the lot, shaken.

The buses had not arrived. And then the troops were pulled out. "Protection till everyone is out of Montgomery," the government had assured us. But there we were, with night falling, and a disorganized mob, trapped in an empty lot, milling about. And the cars with the rednecks, circling, circling...

(Chance? Coincidence? Paranoia?

(Here's what we did not know: the bus drivers had walked out on the job. They would not drive us. A bus had warped in to the curb as a young Presbyterian minister walked up the street, a block away. The door had sighed open, and the Alabama hero had leaned out. "We gonna beat the shit outta alla you mother-wording, sonofaword, wordwordword word bastards tonight, y'all see we don't!" and the bus had whipped away.

(And, inexplicably, the troopers had been withdrawn.

(Chance? Coincidence? Paranoia? Maybe.)

They got three buses into service. Supplementary drivers were offered more money. The buses arrived. I dashed for one. Heroism doesn't go very far when the smell of tar is in the air.

On the ride back to the airport, jammed together, thank God, a small white-and-black dog ran out into the road. The driver could have avoided it without shaking up his passengers. He held steady. The dog was ground under the left front tire, was whipped back and bumpedbumpedbumped all the way to the rear. The driver never batted an eye. He merely glanced at his wristwatch to record the time for the report to the bus company. It was 6:06 p.m.

There was more, much more. They wouldn't give us a loading ramp to get into the plane. We waited four hours. They found a bomb on the plane. It was a nine-hour flight back. Viola Liuzzo. She was killed hurrying back from Selma to Montgomery, to ferry out people left stranded in an empty lot.

It was a lot closer than I care to admit.

And now it's over. I did one day down there, that's all. No big

deal, no special feat, no extra blue ribbon. One day, in a land where one Negro college boy summed it up:

“We live in a state of perpetual caution. Even on the best day, the most ordinary day, you never know when you leave your house in the morning what will happen, what little thing, some redneck on the prod, something small, that will keep you from ever coming home that night.”

I was coming home, and all I could think was: “Please, please, dear God, let me the hell out of this stinking place!”

And still it happens down there. Viola Liuzzo was a white woman, and it made headlines. But the red mud of Alabama covers the corpses of hundreds of nameless black folk, who never made headlines. They never even got their names on tombstones.

Time to pay dues? Yeah, that’s what it is, friends. *Mea Culpa* time in the country of the blind, our country, and we’ve been so blind, so long, it may be too late to see the light.

It ain’t enough to say oh them poor poor people down there. It ain’t enough to say well, hell, they have killings in Chicago and on the New York subways, too. It ain’t enough to send a buck to SNCC or CORE. It ain’t enough when you start matching up all the parlor liberalism against the body blood soaking into that Alabama countryside. It ain’t enough.

The tide of history is washing higher and higher. It cannot long be held back by hooded murderers too cowardly to come out in daylight. It’s coming, thank the Lord, and if you listen, you can hear the sound of it beating against the rock and crumbling walls of racism and evil...

Hear it? Listen closely, hear it?

Hoop-de-hoop. Hoop-de-hoop. Uh. Uh. Uh. Uh.

LEIBER: A FEW TOO FEW WORDS

This essay originally appeared in the program book for the 1979 World Science Fiction Convention, at which Fritz Leiber was the guest of honor. Harlan feels that raving year after year about one's friends eventually becomes suspect, and here he talks about why he won't do it anymore. He also reinforces the reasoning behind his insistence that he not be categorized as a science fiction writer, which was explored earlier in this collection in "You Don't Know Me, I Don't Know You."

On the night wind the request comes in. Like clockwork. Say a few words in praise of Fritz Leiber. Would you mind? We know you're busy, but would you mind? We know you've done this a dozen times already, but would you mind?

Yes, at long last, yes, I mind very much.

This is foolishness. In the last three years I have sat down behind the typewriter on eight different occasions to "say a few words about Fritz Leiber."

I have said that he is one of the perhaps dozen writers in the history of literature whose command of the language, whose inventiveness, whose shining genius intimidates me. I have said that I have no hesitation in ranking him with Poe and Kafka and Borges and Collier and Blackwood and Machen and Shirley Jackson and Gerald Kersh and Rambo and Stanley Ellin; than whom there are no greater. I have said that none of us working in the genre of the fantastic today are free of the lessons taught by Leiber. I have said that he sets a high water mark for all of us struggling to be perfect, that simply cannot be reached. I have said that he is an original and when—dark the day—he leaves us, we will never see his like again. I have said all this, and it's foolishness.

If, after forty years, anyone is foolish or ignorant enough to need words from punks like me about Fritz Leiber, it is a sorry pass indeed.

Honoring him at science fiction conventions is amusing time-waste and perhaps even a touch heartwarming after all this time, but the truth of the matter is that if Fritz Leiber had not devoted his life and his life's work to the insular community of category fantasy, Seacon '79 might well be honoring a Nobel Laureate in literature. But since he did, and since the Nobel juries seem utterly unaware of the laborers in this hideously insular community, he comes to this year and this moment as the totem of fans, rather than as a major entry in every

important study of literary forces in the Twentieth Century. I find that tragic and disgraceful.

To be blunt, and make no friends doing it, Fritz Leiber is—and has always been—too good for his audience. His talent was always too big for the category, his dreams too rich, his goals too noble for us. He deserves far better, much more, than merely being feted at science fiction conventions.

And so I will say no more for such tiny tributes.

He does not need these words from me, or from any of us. He is better than we can ever hope to be; he is grander, finer, deeper, and worthier than any words can say.

After forty years he commands all our love and all our admiration; and what we have to give him now is inadequate.

The words that need to be said about the man and the work called Fritz Leiber are the words spoken by time and posterity. When lesser names like Lovecraft and Merritt and Burroughs are consigned to the academic's shelf of curiosities, the stories written by Fritz Leiber will continue to burn with their own hellishly beautiful blue glow, and the books will continue to be passed down from generation to generation for lesser writers to study and emulate; the stories that make dilettantes wither and *poseurs* ashamed. Time will say what must be said about Fritz Leiber.

So don't ask me again. I have said all I can say about him. He begs description, and his words outshine the best of ours. Honor him if you will, but it's only gilding your own lily. He doesn't need it, he needs and deserves far more; that which we crawlers cannot provide.

For what he has given us, over forty years, no amount of cheap, self-congratulatory accolades, intended to make *us* look important by our merest association with him, count for the smallest tribute.

Time and posterity will say what has to be said for Fritz Leiber. And even they will never speak eloquently enough.

SERITA ROSENTHAL ELLISON: A EULOGY

The following probably would not be available to any of us were it not for the recommendation of Arthur Byron Cover, who told me that Harlan had written a piece on the death of his mother in 1976 which had appeared in "some obscure literary journal." Harlan pulled a copy of the Saint Louis Literary Supplement from his archives and handed it to me with one sentence: "Read it and weep." Crying isn't my style, but I think you will find, as I did, that the following is difficult to read without at least a lump in one's throat.

On Sunday the 10th of October, I committed the final outrage against my family. I spoke the eulogy at my mother's funeral. The family will never speak to me again. I can handle that.

When I say "my family," I mean, mostly, my mother's side. The Rosenthals. Who resemble in more ways than the mind can readily support, the brutalizing members of the Sproul clan in Jerrold Mundis's current and brilliant novel, *Gerhardt's Children*. They remind me of the first line from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

And prime among that unhappy family's myths was the one that Harlan, Serita and Doc's kid, Beverly's brother, would wind up either dead or in an alley somewhere, having come to a useless end...or rotting away his old age in a Federal penitentiary. That I became a writer of some repute and became the first member of either the Rosenthal or the Ellison family to get listed in *Who's Who in America* confounds them to this day. To them, I am like the snail known as the Chambered Nautilus, that has a shell with rooms in it. As the Nautilus lives its brief life it moves from room to room in its shell and finally emerges and dies; thus, it literally carries its past on its back. To the family, I am still a nine-year-old hellion who took a hammer to Uncle Morrie's piano. (The fact that this never happened, that Morrie never owned a piano, does not in any way invalidate for them the apocryphal truth of the legend.)

It is probably no different for anyone reading these words. All families form their opinions of the children early, and so we spend the rest of our lives in large part paying obeisance to shadows who neither care nor *in fact* have any power over our reality. It is thus for all of us, no matter how sophisticated and cut-loose we may be from the familial spiderweb.

To them, I am a nine-year-old Chambered Nautilus; even though I ran away from home at the age of thirteen, grew up, and have barely spoken a dozen words to my sister in the past ten years.

But there was still my mother, whom I supported in large part during the last years of her life, picking up the burden when I was financially able, from my Uncle Lew and my Uncle Morrie and from Beverly's husband, Jerold.

My mother had been terribly ill for many years. To my way of thinking, she wanted to die on May 1st, 1949, when my father had his coronary thrombosis and died in front of both of us. He was her life, her happier aspect, and she became—in any sensible not even exquisite sense—almost somnambulistic.

In August she had the latest of an uncountable number of strokes, followed it with a full-sized heart attack, and was taken into the Miami Heart Institute. She knew the end was on her and she let me know that was the sum of it when we talked long distance.

She lay there getting worse and worse; finally, forty-five days before the green blips went to a flat line on the monitor, she was down from one hundred and twenty pounds to forty-one pounds, her lungs were filled with fluid, her brain had swollen so her face was terribly twisted, her leg was filled with blood clots, her blood sugar had risen to an impossible level, she ran a temperature in excess of 102 degrees constantly, she was blind, paralyzed, and no oxygen was going to the brain.

Blessedly, she was in deep coma.

She never recovered consciousness. They kept her on the IV and the monitoring for a month and a half. She was a vegetable and had she ever come out of it would have been an empty shell. I begged them to pull the plug, but they wouldn't.

The greatest fear my mother ever had was that some day she would wind up in a nursing home. She thought of them as hellholes, as repositories for discarded loved ones, as the very apotheosis of rejection. She begged us never to put her there.

Shortly before she died, the Miami Heart Institute held one of their "status meetings" and decided she was "stable," that is, she needed custodial care. And so they wanted her out. They suggested we get her booked into an old folks' home. They used another phrase. They always do. But it was a hellhole, an old folks' home.

Beverly, my sister, who had gone through the anguish of the last six weeks down there, was forced reluctantly to find such a place. On Friday, October 8th, 1976, the day my mother was to be removed from Miami Heart and carted by ambulance to the hellhole, though she was in deep coma and could not possibly have known what was

intended for her dead but still-breathing husk, she chose to expire at 5:15 a.m.

In some arcane way, I'm sure she knew.

When my brother-in-law Jerold called to tell me Beverly had just advised him of Mom's death, he asked if there were any arrangements I particularly wanted. "Only two," I said. "Closed casket; and I want to read the eulogy."

From that moment till Sunday at the funeral services, my family trembled in fear of what I would say. They knew I was no great lover of the clan, and they were terrified I would make a scene, depart from protocol in a way that would humiliate them in front of friends and relatives. They gave very little thought to my feelings about my mother. But that's the way it always is, I'm sure, with all families, with all deaths.

I flew all night Saturday and got into Cleveland (where my mother's body had been taken, so she could be buried beside my father) at 6:30 in the morning. I drove to Beverly and Jerold's house and when Jerold asked to see the eulogy I'd written, which was almost the first thing he said to me, thus indicating the obsessiveness of their concern about "crazy" Harlan and what he might do, I lied and said I hadn't written anything, that it was to be extemporaneous, from the heart.

The relatives began arriving, and with the exception of my Uncle Lew, who has always been the coolest and the most understanding of the clan, they all circled me warily as if I were a jackal that might at any moment leap for their throats.

At the funeral home, Rabbi Rosenthal seemed equally uneasy about my participation in the ceremonies. It was Succoth, the Jewish harvest holiday, and just a week after Yom Kippur, the holiest of the holies. Thus, certain prayers that are usually spoken at funeral services could not be spoken; alternate words were permissible, but few, so very few.

Rabbi Rosenthal is no relation to my family. His name and my mother's name being Rosenthal is just coincidence. Like Smith. Or Jones. Or Hayakawa. Or Goetz. Or Piazza. He's a fine man, the Rabbi Emeritus of Cleveland Jewry, a strong and familiar voice in Cleveland Heights and environs. He has been for many years. But he didn't know my mother.

My family felt themselves honored to have pulled off the coup of Rabbi Rosenthal attending to the services. My family thinks in those terms: what looks good...social coups...fine form and attention to protocol. As you may have gathered, I am not concerned with shadow, merely reality.

Nonetheless, he advised me he would speak the opening words and

then would call on me.

Before the main room with the pink anodized aluminum casket was opened to the attendees, the immediate family mourners and their spouses and children and grandchildren were taken to a family sitting room to the right of the main chamber. Jane Bubis, Beverly's best friend, bustled around. Morrie met old chums from Cleveland. My nephew Loren and I insisted on seeing Mom. Everyone told us not to look, that she had withered terribly, that we should "remember her as she had been." They always tell you to "remember" someone as "they were." Bear that phrase in mind. The nature of the outrage I committed against my family is contained in my pursuit of that admonition.

Loren and I insisted.

It didn't look like my mother. It was a cleverly constructed mannequin intended for some minor wax museum in an amusement park. The embalmers and cosmeticians had done as good a job as could be done, I'm sure; but it wasn't my Mom. She was already gone. This was a stranger. But I cried. Pain that clotted my chest and made me gasp for breath. But it wasn't my Mom.

The service began, and when Rabbi Rosenthal called on me, I walked up to the lectern foolishly trailing my hand across the casket to establish some last rapport with her.

I pulled the pages I'd written from my inside jacket pocket and though there was no appreciable movement in the people sitting in front of me in the main chamber, the agitation I caught with peripheral vision, from the family seated in the side viewing room, was considerable: the frenzied trembling of small fish perceiving a predator in their pool.

Understand something: my sister and I have never been friends. Eight years older than I, she was *always* distressed at who I was, what I was, what I did. (I have long harbored the fantasy that I was actually a gypsy baby, stolen from the Romany caravan by an attacking horde of Jewish ladies with shopping bags.) Beverly is no doubt an estimable human being, filled to the brimming with love and charity and compassion. I have never been able to discern these qualities in her, but she has many loyal friends and if an election were to be held among the relatives, as to which of us could safely be taken into polite society of an evening without worry about a "scene," my sister Beverly would win in a walk. Though they take a (to me) somewhat hypocritical pride in my achievements and the low level of fame I've achieved for the Ellison family, it is a public pride, not to be confused with actually having to get near me. I can handle that, too.

As I began to read, my sister began to fall apart. I'm not sure if it was the "inappropriateness" (to her mind) of what I was saying, or the

fact that I was crying and having difficulty reading the words, or that the torture she had undergone for six weeks had finally broken her, but she began writhing in Jerold's grasp, and in a voice that could be heard throughout the funeral home hoarsely cried for Jerold to "make him stop, make him stop! Stop him!" Beside her, her daughter Lisa, my niece, snarled, "Shut up,

Mother!" but Beverly never heard her. She was manipulating her environment, and her lunatic brother Harlan was doing another of his disgusting numbers, desecrating the funeral of her mother. They finally manhandled her into another room, where her cries could still be heard. And I went on, with difficulty. And this is what I said:

My mother died three days ago. Her name was Serita R. Ellison. The R stood for Rosenthal, her maiden name. I'll tell you everything I know about her.

My mother told me only one joke in her entire life. She probably knew a lot of others, but she never told them to me. I'll tell you the one she told me.

It's about these two Jewish fellows who meet on a street in Buffalo, New York. They are related, see, but not close; something like in-laws once removed. And Herschel doesn't care much for Solly, because Solly is always trying to sell him some crazy thing or get him involved in some shtumie business deal. But Herschel gets trapped coming out of the butcher shop and Solly says to him, "Have I got a deal for you! And Herschel says, "If it's as good as that last deal, this time we'll go to the bankruptcy court hand-in-hand."

And Solly says, "Listen, you can't pass this one up. It's terrific! A friend of mine is having an affair with a woman whose second husband's brother is married to a girl whose father is in business with a guy whose son is a merchandising agent for circuses, and I can get for you, for a mere three thousand dollars, a guaranteed fully grown, two ton Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey elephant."

So Herschel looks at him like he's sprouted another head, and he says, "You know, you've gotta be out of your mind. I live in a fifth-floor walkup apartment with a wife and four kids, and one of them is sleeping in the sink we got so little room. What the hell am I gonna do with an elephant, you dummy?"

And Solly says, "Listen, only because you're married to Gert, I'm gonna make this a special. You can have the elephant for two thousand five hundred."

Herschel starts screaming. "Listen you yotz, what is it with you, are you deaf or something. I'm telling you I don't want, I don't need, I have no

use for a two ton elephant, not for twenty-five-hundred, not for nothing. How the hell am I supposed to get the thing up the stairs? What do I feed it? You could die just from the body heat of a thing like that in a four-room apartment. Get away from me, you moron!"

And they argue back and forth, with Solly constantly reducing the price, till finally he says, as a last resort, "Okay, okay, you momser! You want to bleed me, a relative, you got no heart? Okay! My last and final offer. For you...not one...but two! Two two ton Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey elephants for five hundred dollars!"

And Herschel says, real quick, "Now you're talking business!"

When Momma told me that joke she was laughing. She laughed very long and very hard, and I did, too. Not because the joke was so funny, although it's not bad and she told it well, but because she was laughing. I never saw my mother laugh very much.

From May of 1949 on, I never saw her laugh at all.

That was when my father died.

It's impossible to talk about Serita without talking about Doc. Of course I never knew them when they were young and running around the way young people do, but from what I'm told by members of the Rosenthal family, they were some kind of short, Jewish equivalent of Scott Fitzgerald and Zelda. They were in love, and they were nuts together.

When my father died, I think my mother's life stopped. It was twenty-seven years of shadows for her. Just marking time. Waiting to join Doc. If there's anything good about death, and anything that even remotely lightens the pain of my mother's death, it is that finally, after twenty-seven years, she came up lucky and went to meet my dad, to take up where they got cut off in 1949.

I'd tell you how old my mother was when she died, but as anyone who knew her for more than an hour can tell you, she would rather have had bamboo shoots thrust under her fingernails than reveal her age. She was like that.

She was a good woman, and a decent woman, and had all the right instincts about life, all the usual things people say at funerals; she was also opinionated, stubborn beyond belief, a frequent pain in the ass, and capable of a dudgeon so high it would put the Queen Mother to shame. But God, how she worked for her kids. I don't remember a time when she wasn't working. Either beside my dad in the jewelry stores, or in the B'nai B'rith Thrift Shop, or somewhere. And no matter how much we took, she always came up with what we needed.

I remember once when I was a very little kid—and I was not the

world's most tractable youngster—when I did something grotesque and awful; and Mom said, “You’re going to get it when your father comes home.” No doubt I deserved it. I usually did. And when my dad got back from work, exhausted and anxious simply to sit down and relax, Mom told him what I’d done and that I needed a good strapping.

Now understand: my family wasn’t that big on corporal punishment. But my dad took me down in the basement of our house on Harmon Drive in Painesville, and he took off his belt and he did a good job on me.

After a while, I came upstairs, and Mom and Dad were nowhere to be seen. I climbed the stairs to the second floor and through the closed door of their bedroom I could hear my dad crying. The licking had devastated him much more than it had me. And my mom was crying, too. She was consoling him, telling him it was the only thing he could do, and together they were solacing each other.

The Rosenthals were a family with a capacity for unhappiness that was awesome to behold, and Mom was a Rosenthal to her shoetops. There was the endless ganging-up of brothers and sisters in ever-changing permutations of the familial equation, with my mom sometimes allied with Alice and Lew against Morrie, and sometimes associated with Morrie and Dorothy against Martin, and sometimes the hookups were so Machiavellian it was impossible to tell who was mad at whom. But throughout, no matter how affronted she thought she should be, my mother was a Rosenthal, who would take fire and axe to anyone who tried to harm one hair on the head of her kind. The Russian soul of the Rosenthals, which was so intimately a part of my mother’s makeup, kept her from tasting unlimited joy in her later years—my niece Lisa was the great exception—they were in no way like grandchild and grandmother: they were best friends, chums, and the love between them so enriched both their lives that I think Mom’s death is more crushing for Lisa than for any of us—but even so my mother managed to see Beverly well-married and the mother of two good kids, and me safely beyond any possibility of spending my life in jail. She took that to be treasure indeed.

I wish I could tell you more about Serita Ellison, but the sad, sorry fact is that we lived our lives as shadows to one another. We never really understood each other, the dreams never realized, the hopes set aside, the hungers that made us alien to one another. And so at final moments, as I speak of her, I try to hold the important memories; and the one that is richest, most recent is the picture of her in New Haven, Connecticut, in February of last year. I was invited to speak at the Yale Political Union, at Yale University, and I brought Mom up for the prestigious event. She was like a twenty-year-old girl. She was, as she used to put it, “in Seventh Heaven.” Her kid was lecturing at Yale! How she did kvell! What naches!

Radiant, like all the suns of the universe. It was snowing so hard in New Haven, and the drifts were so deep, and it was so bitterly cold, I was terrified that a woman in her condition would suffer damage. But she strode around like a cossack. I had to run to keep up with her.

And at my lecture, when I introduced her, she stood up and nodded so regally to all the Yalies that I thought I'd burst from pleasure. And when they brought over my books for her to autograph, she wrote, "Thank you for liking my son's books."

Near the end, when she was clearly in pain and knew she was going away, we talked several times a day long distance, and I kept saying, "I'll come down there." And she kept saying, "No, I don't want you to see me like this. Beverly and Lisa are here, and I'm all right." She was more lucid than she'd been in years; I guess she knew it was all over; and she said to me during what I guess was the last time we talked, though it might not have been the last time, "You turned out all right and I love you."

And now she's gone, and there's nothing much to say about the death of an old woman, any old woman, except that she's dead and everyone who knew her now has a finite number of days and nights to lament never having said all the things that should have been said.

She was my mother, and I miss her.

By the time I stepped off the platform and returned to the family room at the side of the main chamber, Beverly had been returned to her seat. I'm not sure she even heard the eulogy beyond the telling of the "joke." After the ceremony was completed—so briefly, so awfully briefly—no one would speak to me. No one came up and said, "That was beautiful, what you said about your mother." My nephew Loren shook my hand and we hugged, because he was crying, too, and he said, very softly, "You did good." Much later, Jerold took me aside and said, "Serita would have been proud of you." But other than those two remarks, I was shunned. Beverly, the uncles and aunts, they didn't stone me, but they made sure they didn't even brush my shoulder. One holds oneself aloof from pariahs and other unclean. And their outrage frees me of them forever.

My mother is gone, and I did what I wanted to do for her: she always enjoyed listening to me read, so I did it one last time for her. I know damned well she never heard it, but it's an innocent conceit. And they wanted to put her down too quickly, with too few words being spoken. I would have read my eulogy and then asked Beverly and Lisa and Lew and anyone else who had something to say, to come up and say it. She deserved that much at least.

Eulogies are never for the dead. They are always for the living; to pay off debts; to say goodbye formally one last time. But no one

should be sent down into darkness with too few words.

CENTERPUNCHING

This profile was written in 1968 on assignment for Eye magazine. The values which Harlan explores and the personal insights offered in this tribute to Steve McQueen make me very glad that a short-sighted editor bounced it from another, earlier collection, so that it can appear here.

"I don't like anybody trying to cap me up. I don't think *anybody* should try to cap someone else."

McQueen said that to me, the first time we met. He was letting me know out-front that he didn't want to be tied up in a neat little writer's *precis*; encapsulated, predicted, fully-known. He didn't want to be found out, and he sure as hell didn't want someone wandering around in the dark, poking fingers, and presenting half-truth as fact.

So where do you go to find a man? Not into the mouth of the publicity animal, because down in that gullet all you find are the chewed-over remains of promotional persiflage. Not to his friends, because they lie, for or against, all in the name of fairness, and never know they're lying. Not to his wives or lovers, because they either hate him or love him, and either way the truth vanishes in the mist. Not to his business associates, because they can't get their heads free of how much he's worth to them; so you never get an answer with any salt in it.

If it's that difficult to find an ordinary man, where the hell do you wander to find Steve McQueen, who is anything but ordinary?

McQueen's projected image, the shadowy pseudo reality of a million Hollywood hash-dreams, is roughly that of a corrupt Huckleberry Finn. So *that* ain't where he's at.

I supposed you went to McQueen to find him.

Maybe.

In an office building that looks like a motel (in L.A. *all* the office buildings look like motels...and all the motels look like churches, and all the churches look like 19 cent hamburger stands) I found him in the offices of Solar, his production company.

He came up from behind an uncluttered desk, and offered his hand. He gave me the same quick smile I was later to see him give a bit-player in the film *Bullitt*. In the film, McQueen is at showdown time with a killer, is trying to locate him on an outbound flight from San Francisco International, and the bit-player is an airlines ticket clerk causing him a momentary delay. He slides past her with that

smile; that ready smile that says *get out of the way*. It was a wary smile, but straight enough for openers with me.

Casually dressed in sandals, white Levi's with the tag cut off, and a seersucker Nehru shirt; with longish hair; he was about as safe as anybody ever really gets in Hollywood. But wary. Jesus, was he wary. How did he know I wasn't another of those trickytoe writers toadying around for an inside grope on a McQueen feature, prepared to let Solar do me dandy on their expense account, and then turn around at publication time, and jam a bolo knife in his back. All that nonsense about McQueen the daredevil, McQueen the risk-taker, McQueen the man with the death wish. Or talk about some bum flick he'd made fifteen years ago, when he had to pay the rent on a railroad flat in Greenwich Village so small the mice were hunchbacked. How did he know I was an admirer, that I wanted him to open up and talk about where his head was at? He didn't. So: wary. God, how wary.

We sat and let the tape recorder run, and some of it I can use, but most of it is too smooth, too safe, not what he'd want on his tombstone, and not what I'd want under my byline.

Forty-five minutes later I shut it off. "This is nowhere," we both said, at almost the same instant. Then he grinned for real. Not the winsome smile, but the real one. He suddenly wanted to do a thing. He maybe really wanted to get into it. So we jackpotted about it for a few minutes, and he said, "A couple of times when I took writers out with me, to move around with me, to get a story, they took a very natural thing I might do, and made it look silly. But I'll take a chance with you."

Then he turned to Rick Ingersoll, his publicity man, and he said, more for my benefit than Ingersoll's, "If I'm gonna go with him, I gotta go all the way, right?"

The instructions I'd been given to get to McQueen's home read like the opening sequence of a "Mission: Impossible," ending with the words: "Just before you reach the big wooden gates, you will find an intercom system. Ring the bell. Wait for an answer. Announce yourself. The electric gates will open. Drive up to the house." I expected the instructions to self-destruct in fifteen seconds.

I drove up the winding approach to the house. A big, sprawling beast, sunk to its knees in the hilltop, overlooking exclusive Brentwood far below. A Spanish Mediterranean house of stone and wood and Mexican tile, built in 1937, hunkered down on four and a half acres of McQueen-owned pine trees. Littered with happy kids. Neile, McQueen's gamin wife, slim and delicate as a Dresden figurine, came out of the house with him. They were walking close together,

their arms around each other's waist. If Steve McQueen *never* said "how great my old lady is" (which he does, frequently), the way they came out of that house would have said it all.

Inside: a front hall with a circular staircase and a rustic, round oldwood ceiling. Nice. Very nice. "Our Errol Flynn hall," Neile Adams McQueen said.

In the living room it was quiet. Very masculine house, with solid, comfortable furniture. The backyard looked out over the pool and the tailored grounds, and far off down there below, Hollywood, all snapping and glaring with light, a big klieg searchbeam fingering the sky, announcing the opening of a shoe store somewhere. And it reminded me of something McQueen had said earlier that day, in the office, when we were trying to sound each other, to find out if we had mutual friends in the town. We'd both decided that we probably didn't have any cross-path friends, for neither of us hung too heavy with the glitterset, and McQueen—dead serious—said, "I pulled out a long time ago. I mean, all the way out. I'm married, and that's where my heart is, in my home. I like it where it's quiet." It was quiet up here, up above Hollywood. A man could stay sane up here—where the breeze was cool and the nice lady always smiled with adoration.

Then Tim Kiley and Jerry Siegel arrived. Kiley, a slim, balding man with a wonky sense of humor, was the director of the "Ed Sullivan Show." Siegel was an assistant director, out of Warner Bros.-7 Arts. And for the first time I got word where we were going: we were to drive to Palm Springs that night, and the next morning, in a projected heat of 114 degrees, Kiley and Siegel and Ed Sullivan were going to film a segment featuring McQueen doing wheelies in the low desert. Yeah, well, that was all right, too. I'd wanted to see McQueen handle a motorcycle. All right? It was perfect for me: if I wanted to find out who and where Steve McQueen really was.

Put a *saint* out in 114° heat for ten hours, and he'd come up for real.

Steve McQueen is 38 years old, a fact that is strangely absent from the publicity information available. March 24, 1930, an Aries with Scorpio rising. (McQueen puts a good deal of stock in astrology. He chuckles, however, at a parallel drawn between him and Hitler, also an Aries with Scorpio rising: at Solar, some of his employees put up a sign that read TODAY HOLLYWOOD, TOMORROW...THE WORLD!)

He was born in Beech Grove, a suburb of Indianapolis, but when his parents separated, he was seven months old; he was given into the custody of his great-Uncle C. W. Thompson and his wife, and raised in

Slater, Missouri. He returned with his mother to California when he was eight and she remarried. That it was an unsettling childhood, and that McQueen found as much education in the streets as he did in the home is attested to by his winding up, at the age of thirteen, in the Boy's Republic at Chino. During his formative years he got to know the business end of cops. And loneliness. And alienation. And *alla* that stuff. Which makes his current attitudes about cops and *alla that* very dichotomous. But more of that later.

Listing his peregrinations after the Boy's Republic would be like reading the credits of a novelist on the dust wrapper of his Great American Something: deckhand on a Greek oil tanker South America-bound; oil rigger in Texas; topper in a Canadian lumber camp; carny shill; ballpoint-pen salesman; TV repairman; finally a stint with the U.S. Marines, as tanker and mechanic.

He got sprung from the Marines in 1950, kicked around the country (ours) and did odd jobs, mostly automotive. He wound up in Greenwich Village and eventually a girl he had been dating, an actress, introduced him to drama coach Sandy Meisner, who gave him a part in a Yiddish play on Second Avenue. McQueen got \$40 a week for his one line of dialogue.

He graduated from the Neighborhood Playhouse in 1952, won a scholarship to the Uta Hagen-Herbert Berghof Drama School, did summer stock, and by 1954 he had logged many hours of flight-time on the legitimate stage. He was accepted by Lee Strasberg's Actors Studio and after a while stepped in as lead replacement for Ben Gazzarra in *A Hatful Of Rain*. In 1958 he arrived in Hollywood, appeared in a segment of Robert Culp's "Trackdown" and made enough of an impression that subsequently, when Four Star TV went casting for the upcoming "Wanted—Dead Or Alive" series, he popped into mind, and won the starring role of Josh Randall, bounty-hunter with a cut down 44-40 carbine known as a "hawg's-leg."

Among the few actors to make the transition from television to star status in films—James Garner, Mia Farrow and Clint Eastwood are the only others that come readily to mind—McQueen has gone on to appearances in *The Magnificent Seven*, *The Great Escape*, *Love With the Proper Stranger*, *Soldier In The Rain*, *The Cincinnati Kid*, *Nevada Smith*, *Baby, the Rain Must Fall*, *The Sand Pebbles*, *The Thomas Crown Affair*, *Bullitt* (which is a bitch of a picture) and the forthcoming adaptation of William Faulkner's *The Reivers*.

Today he has a career, a home, a wife, and two kids—daughter Terri Leslie, and son Chad.

He has a Mini Cooper, a VW, a Porsche, a Land Rover and a Ferrari. He also has an International-Harvester pickup truck. The rear deck of the pickup holds a pair of bikes, tied down for travel. That

night McQueen lumbered out of the Santa Monica Mountains overlooking Hollywood with a pair of Triumph 650 choppers in the truck. 650's with Rickman-Mettisse frames, 18 inch full knob rear wheels, 21 inch front wheels. We all headed for the low desert, McQueen's natural habitat.

McQueen's Land Rover careened around white sand dunes and exploded through pucker-bushes, the rear wheels leaving the ground, Tim Kiley clutching the windscreen as the balled-fist heat of the slipstream smashed him; McQueen was driving us out past Palm Desert, to show us the locations he'd spotted several days before. He spun the wheel like a Formula I driver taking the esses. He'd been one. It wasn't always necessary to come crashing through stunted Choya cactus and dry mesquite they call pucker-bush, or skid through slalom curves at fifty, but McQueen was giving the howlies a thrill, getting into it, letting each of *us* get into it. Behind us Siegel and two other men on the project clung for all their lives to the seats and each other. And no one whimpered in fear; McQueen has a strange effect on people. They instinctively up their cool to match his. They keep their inadequacies under cover, they don't want to disappoint him. Or, more probably, they don't want him to reject them on grounds of personal weakness. I saw it many times—people trying to be more than what they were—for McQueen's sake. Kiley bounced high as we took one particularly high hillock, and came down on my hat. He tried to say sorry, but the next curve threw him sidewise and he was too busy holding on for amenities.

Finally, we dipped down into a wash, came up the other side, whipped around the rim of a larger bowl and, spraying sand from the four-wheel drive, McQueen skidded to a halt. He was out of the Rover before the rest of us could orient ourselves. He was around the Rover, had Kiley by the arm, and was indicating with sharp and definite hand-movements where he thought the filming could best be done.

"Now, if you like the idea, I can come out of the desert over there, see, and I'll do some wheelies and some jumps, and come over from that direction there, and I'll jump that line of hoopedoos, and then right over that little boonie, through those pucker-bushes, and around there, and end up right here, right in front of Mr. Sullivan, and I'll bury the rear wheel and spray sand back. How about that?"

Tim Kiley was standing in the middle of mind-blasting white desert, the sun at eight in the morning was already hammering us senseless, the glare was deafening, the silence spilled over like the Great Victoria Falls. He was a New York director in the center of a land that had gone unchanged since great saurians had stalked the

earth. He was awed, by the land, and by the electric intensity of this McQueen who moved and breathed as if he was born naked and ready in the desert. McQueen was helping him in a way no amateur could have helped him: laying out the shots with care and imagination, saving him the time-consuming trouble of bobbling about in the sand. Kiley was enthusiastic about McQueen's suggestions.

And I saw, for the first time, the way McQueen hangs in there on the smallest details. He runs the ship. There is no doubt about that. It is his gig, every way. You move into *his* scene, never the other way around. By his simple presence he dominates every group I ever saw him in. Yet he was not pushing. He was sincerely interested in getting for Kiley and the Sullivan Show the very best footage possible.

It was not the last time that day I saw him take control.

When the studio truck from Warner Bros.-7 Arts arrived, in company with the bus bearing production personnel, McQueen found out the Studio had prepared for the gig ineptly; they had not sent out vehicles capable of running in dune country. (He had no idea how *badly* Warners had shafted him; he was to find out later; too much later, unfortunately.)

Though McQueen was cool about it, I gathered from remarks others passed that this was only the latest skirmish in a battle of personalities that scoped large as money differences between McQueen's Solar Productions, and Warners-7 Arts...but when it got down to the fine tuning, the personalities were McQueen and Kenneth Hyman, executive vice-president in charge of worldwide production for Warners-7 Arts.

McQueen's Solar had only done one film under Warners-7 Arts aegis: *Bullitt*. It had been a fight from the first moment to the last between McQueen—a strong-minded stickler for detail—and Hyman—a studio exec who was in trouble. Hyman needed a winner to make the quarterly-annual report read in the black. He wanted McQueen to make *Bullitt* on the stages in Burbank, with Warners-7 Arts personnel, with only exteriors shot in San Francisco. McQueen had a heavy personal stake in the film. He knew the script as he had received it needed work, needed some clout inserted, and doing it Hyman's way would be inadequate. He fought Hyman and Warners-7 Arts all down the line, and Hyman fought back in the only way a studio executive *can* fight back. He bugged McQueen:

On a morning when McQueen arose with sweaty palms and a dry mouth, knowing he was going to do the intricate and dangerous driving that culminates in an incredible high speed chase on San Francisco's streets, he received a studio communique saying he was not allowed to ride his Triumph to and from shooting locations. The insanity of telling a man who was about to risk his life burning rubber

in the single most gut-numbing automobile sequence ever filmed, that he could not ride his bike to and from work, was not lost on McQueen.

Nor was this latest knife-in-the-back tactic lost on him.

McQueen *was* bugged, but he instantly set it up so all the equipment could be moved out to the filming site in his Land Rover. It entailed many trips, with the Rover acting as ferry, from the highway to the shooting location out in the dunes; and by the time the reflectors and camera and crew had been set up, it was almost mid-day, and the heat slammed men flat without remorse. It was wide-open on the dunes, and only McQueen seemed really at home, at one with the camouflaged white lizards that zipped past in the shifting sand.

He began rehearsing his ride, the approach to the spot where a subsequent shot would show Ed Sullivan meeting him.

He kicked off on the bike, and went out into the glaring desert, and then like thunder came highballing back in, again and again, spinning to a stop right where he'd said he would, digging that rear wheel into the sand, sending a spume of sandspray fanning out behind him.

(FROM THE TAPE:

ELLISON: You once said you rode bikes because a man has to take risks. What do you mean by that?

MCQUEEN: I do it because I like it, and it's a very private thing. I don't figure I'm anything so special with motorcycles, but I do it because I need it, even though I get scared like everyone else. You ought to understand this about me and motorcycle riding: I've lived in a very closed world, and I've tried very hard while I was racing to keep cameras away and public relations people away, because it's my private world, and I *do* feel strongly about it.

ELLISON: You done taking risks?

MCQUEEN: Oh, I don't know, there was some publicity thing about me, about a death wish, that I'm so brave and everything like that. It was silly. I ride bikes, and I still go out in the dirt, but I never looked at it as being risky, and when my heart jumps up into my mouth I know I'm going too fast, so I slow down. I'd rather say involvement than risks. They're the same thing, I suppose, but one is positive and

the other can be very negative.

(END TAPE INSERT)

McQueen was a demon for work. With the heat going up and up, and production personnel draining the water casks, he kept hitting it out into the desert, running over the route of the single shot, again and again.

Finally, it was time to shoot. McQueen called for a clean black t-shirt. The one he'd worn through the rehearsal was soaked with sweat. As the crew was moving the camera down as close as possible to the spot McQueen would end up, he climbed to the top of the dune we were using as a command post. "Want some water?" I asked. He shook his head. "A desert guy I know told me to try and go half a day without any, makes it easier for the rest of the day." Around me, studio grips and gaffers listened, and their eyes bulged as their tongues swelled as their hands reached for the little conical cups of ice water.

Sullivan arrived in the Land Rover, ferried in from the highway and his air conditioned, chauffeured Cadillac that had brought him out from the hotel in Palm Springs to this beautiful, desolate spot. He looked old, but game.

McQueen was very polite, genuinely solicitous. For McQueen it was a great kick. Ed Sullivan! A legend in his own time, asking Steve McQueen, the kid from Slater, Missouri, to ride bikes on his reelee big shewww! Even the superstars can be impressed by other superstars.

Siegel joined the group. "Where's this, uh, dune buggy?" Sullivan asked.

McQueen's Solar Plastics & Engineering Company manufactures a radical new type of dune buggy. McQueen had accepted a contract with a large department store chain to sell them exclusively, but had just about decided to cancel the contract and market the vehicles personally. The dune buggy was to be used in the segment with Sullivan. He had a heavy stake in this publicity break, even as he had had in *Bullitt*—which had turned out to be a personal triumph for him, over Ken Hyman's opposition.

"It's on its way from L.A.," McQueen answered. "My mechanics were on it all night, setting it up. It'll be here."

Sullivan seemed pleased, though a bit bewildered by the heat, the desert, the vastness of the scene.

He stood under a studio reflector, catching the shade, as Kiley

urged Steve to get aboard the Triumph, to make the first shot. McQueen was gone in an instant, out on the desert, getting smaller and smaller and then lost amid the hoopedoes. Then abruptly he was roaring in toward us, vanishing down the backside of the boonie, and like one of Quantrill's Raiders suddenly exploding into the air, smashing through pucker-bushes, and sliding to a stop right in front of the camera lens. Sullivan—wearing a short-sleeved blue shirt-jac bought that morning at the hotel's men's shop—sauntered up. Incongruously. As though there was some sanity to his being there, afoot, in the midst of 114° of California low desert, without a twinkle of sweat on him.

McQueen legged-over on the bike, unsnapped his helmet and greeted Sullivan.

"Well! Steve! Steve McQueen!"

Pause, for the studio applause that would come some Sunday later.

"Hello, Ed."

"Well, what is all this, Steve? I knew you rode motorcycles, but is this something new, riding out here in the desert?"

McQueen actually answered the question. It seemed a singularly cornball kind of dialogue to hold with a man who has just come scampering out of nowhere at a killing speed, but Kiley assured me later that it was this simple, direct charm on Sullivan's part that enchanted Sullivan's audience.

The inane conversation went on for a few minutes, ending with Steve McQueen suggesting Sullivan take a ride with him in the dune buggy. Which hadn't arrived yet. Sullivan accepted. They walked out of the camera frame. Cut.

Kiley and McQueen felt it needed another take.

McQueen was unhappy with the skid. It wasn't as full as it should have been. So he did it again. And again. And again. The heat was debilitating. Sullivan took off the fresh blue shirt-jac, and waited. They ran through it again. The dune buggy didn't arrive. Old grips and gaffers and photographers and toadies and hangers-on sweated. The sun climbed. McQueen kept going for perfection...punching...punching...punching...

(The night before, when I'd come to his home, prior to leaving for Palm Springs, McQueen's kids and other neighborhood children were riding their bikes back and forth outside the window. McQueen saw them getting close to a pileup, and he stuck his head out the window, shouting to his son, "Chad! You better stop that crisscrossing before one of you centerpunches the other!" Centerpunching: a racetrack word, meaning to hit headfirst into another car's middle. That was the way he went at work that day...centerpunching.)

We broke for lunch. Sullivan looked wasted. With his shirt off you

could see all the scars of his operations. He looked like he was empty, held together by silver pins. But he was game. He hung in there, and McQueen could not conceal his respect and admiration.

It was a key to McQueen. Tenacity wins his respect.

After lunch, the dune buggy arrived. It was a lovely thing. Open frame, big balloon tires, canopy, a fierce little mother that McQueen climbed down into and screeched off into the desert. Then he went to scout locations for shooting with the buggy.

We waited. An hour. Two hours. The sun thundered and the desert rippled with the kind of heat that turns eyes to poached eggs. Everyone assumed McQueen was doing the location thing. Almost three hours later, he came walking back in from the mindboggling vastness.

The buggy had broken down.

Without hat, without shirt, without water, in 114 degrees of killing heat, Steve McQueen had walked out of three miles of desert.

He wasn't even winded.

No one seemed to pay any attention.

The man had performed a feat that might have killed any average man, a feat that would certainly have sunstroked even a strong man. But McQueen had done it, had grown perhaps a bit more tanned, didn't think anything about it, joked that it was a good thing the Highway Patrol didn't have to pull him out again as they'd done several times before, and was impatient to start shooting again.

Amazed, I watched the shooting proceed. The next shot was to be a closeup of McQueen and Sullivan in the dune buggy, sitting and talking as though they'd just finished the ride. Though the actual filming of the ride would come the next day, Kiley wanted to get the closeups out of the way. (The thought of Sullivan, fragile Sullivan, held together with moxie and baling wire, being jounced out of his gourd by McQueen at 40 mph on that desert, was a stopper.) They shot it and shot and shot it again.

Finally, as the day drew to a close, Kiley asked the sound truck man if the noise of the camera rolling was audible. The soundman raised his eyebrows. "Of course," he said. McQueen froze. Kiley was astounded. "What do you mean: 'of course'?"

The soundman seemed at a loss in the face of their concern. "The sound is loud through *all* the stuff we shot today...everything."

McQueen's face changed. For an instant I saw anger. Pure, naked, undiluted anger.

The idiot soundman! The moron! The jerk had lost an entire day's shooting. Everything they had been through—the grueling racing shots McQueen had done, the slides, the retakes, the heat, Sullivan getting faint, the dune buggy breaking down, the walk out of the

furnace—all of it had been for nothing.

Warners-7 Arts had screwed him proper. They'd sent a crew so amateurishly unqualified for the job that the footage was unuseable. It was a moment without time. A moment without movement, breathless, in which the enormity of the horror of what had happened settled like smog across everyone baking dead in the sun. McQueen was stripped back to basics in that moment. He could have blown. No one would have blamed him. He could have grabbed that soundman by the throat and run him under the balloon tires of the dune buggy, and everyone would have applauded. But he didn't. He breathed deeply, backed off from the kill, and took control again.

"We'll start over tomorrow. Let's go back to the hotel and get a good night's sleep."

No risks? Like hell, no risks! It takes a special sort of man to risk a view inside himself piercing enough to know that he has to be cool.

I began to understand where McQueen was at. I began to know what it takes for a man to walk through the graveyard and desolation of Hollywood, with this kind of life-turning-point every few steps, and know which way to go. The admiration he had for Sullivan's hanging in there was abruptly matched by my own for *his*.

McQueen would hear of nothing but my coming back to his home in Palm Springs, to take a swim in the pool, to let his housekeeper fix a good meal, to unlash from the horrors and futility of the day. Even at ease, even unbending, he was hanging in there.

Kiley and Siegel and I were joined by the mechanics and engineers of Solar Plastics & Engineering, along with Lew Jordan, McQueen's jovial plant manager. Kiley and Siegel and I sat around and talked about what had happened that day, and sometime later, I realized McQueen was gone.

I went looking, and found him sitting out in the front yard with his dune buggy compatriots, discussing suspension geometry. I hung back where they couldn't see me, and listened. As wary and precise in his speech as he had been around me, around other "arty" types, that was how free and loose he was talking to the cycle and buggy group. He was in his element. They understood and respected each other. There was none of the mysterioso of the word-wielders here; it was the same ease with which McQueen grooved behind talking to athletes, to men who made their livings in the blood sports of bike riding and sports car racing, to men who practiced the martial arts of Oriental body sports. It was the cult of the men who do it all themselves, who hang in there and let it all hang out. There is no shucking possible on a football field or on a dirt track or in a fight ring. The credentials are

all right there, in the open. Even as McQueen's credentials are right there, in the open.

He said to me, "I live for myself, and I answer to nobody and I'm not trying to sound pompous or anything like that, but I live for myself and I feel that I have no obligation to answer to anybody for anything."

The answer of course, to the question where is McQueen at, lies in that statement. He is precisely what he seems to be.

Steve McQueen is most what he seems to be in *Bullitt*. It may very well be his best film work to date. It is a cop story, takes place in San Francisco. It is one of the gutsiest films I've seen in a long while. As mentioned, it features a 100 mph car chase through the streets of San Francisco, and McQueen did his own driving. It figures. Of course he'd do it himself. He does everything himself.

He has made his life for himself, he is his own man, and where he's at today is a product of knowing which way to go when the pressure is on.

I asked him, do you believe in God? He answered, "I believe in me. God'll be #1 as long as I'm #1." I asked him what he thought of the world. He answered, "The world is as good as you are. You've got to learn to like yourself first. I'm a little screwed-up, but I'm beautiful." I asked him what he had to say to the young people who admired him, and he answered with such intensity I didn't need to write it down to get it just the way he said it:

"They'd better protect what they've got."

From who?

"From the bad guys."

"They don't need me for a voice...they don't need anybody," he said. "They know the robot machine of politics is drowning in its own spit and compromise. They know, and they won't put up with it for much longer." And then he added, drawing a line from the beautiful kids to God, "They're not afraid to get nailed for what they believe in. And when you can get nailed is when you find out where God is."

We talked a lot that night, at his home in Palm Springs. We talked about bikes and about people. And he dealt with the one as straight as he dealt with the other.

Because of *Bullitt*, and because of some things he had said about cops, we talked about The Law. "You know," he said, "I had some run-ins with police when I was a kid, and I never really had much use for them. I thought like a kid. But now because I am where I am, I guess I'm a kind of figure to some people, so I have a responsibility, and I think like a man. I know there are bad cops. I don't like them any more than the good cops like them. But you never realize how necessary cops are till you pull some trouble, then you're damned glad

they're around. I think it's a shame that cops have gotten such an ugly name because of the bad ones. You never think about the bike officer who used to show the neighborhood kids how his motorcycle worked, because that kind of cop doesn't exist much any more. But working on *Bullitt* I had a lot to do with cops, and what they've got to do to protect us isn't easy. Maybe all this noise about cops will do some good—help to get the bums out and let the good cops do their job the way they should.”

If I had heard that from a right-winger, I'd have dismissed it as hypocritical, as meaning *use the Mace and get it on*. But hearing it from McQueen, and knowing where his head was, it sounded straight, sounded right. His philosophy was deep heartland America, maybe cornball and rinky-tink to those who choose to over-intellectualize the simplest problems, but it told me not only where Steve McQueen was at, but where he'd come from, and most important, where he was going.

He came out of the streets and the roads. He paid his dues, and he knew that the salvation was people. The way he said it ON THE TAPE:

“I'm out of the Midwest. It was a good place to come from. It gives you a sense of right or wrong and fairness, which I think is very lacking in our society. We're getting very hippy-dippy now and it seems that strength and integrity are often talked about, but very rarely used. Integrity is going down a dark street.”

Where is Steve McQueen at?

He's somewhere down that dark street. Centerpunching.

Ed. note: Steve McQueen died November 7, 1980, not of recklessness, but of cancer. Harlan was so overcome with rage and grief that he secluded himself and was not seen for a day.

VOE DOE DEE OH DOE

(A SILVERBERG MEDLEY) RECORDED BY THE L.A. SYNTOPICON
SYNCOPATERS (Harlan Ellison & HIS ORCHESTRA) VICTOR
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The following appreciation of Harlan's long-time friend, Bob Silverberg, was written in 1977 for the program book of the World Science Fiction Convention. It is one of my personal favorites of the essays in this book and would have been included even if I had never come to know and adore Bob. But, watching the two of them in action together over time, I've had the opportunity to appreciate the deeper statement about friendship which Harlan delivers in this profile.

He introduced me to Scarlatti, Vivaldi, Monteverdi, Buxtehude and hot pizza. I traded him; for Thelonious Monk, Charlie Mingus, the MJQ, Django Reinhardt and Nik-Nik shirts made in Italy. Oh, how I love him.

It cost me over eighty thousand dollars, but I can sit here in my new office wing, built on my house in Los Angeles, and gaze off across my roof not at exposed water pipes and the sternwheeler splatterings of crazed hummingbirds, but a sumptuous expanse of flowering succulents and cacti. *Pseudolobivia Kermesina* gifted me with an enormous pink and scarlet flower just this morning. This evening it was ash-dead. Silverberg built me a roof garden. How I admire and enjoy his books, particularly the sad ones.

I think we'd met before that, but I remember him first as sitting in an easy chair in a convention hotel in Philadelphia in the early Fifties. He wore white bucks. He drank beer from quart bottles. Jesus, I thought he was urbane. Christ, did he have me fooled. He was cool, not urbane. I'm urbane. Now I am, not then I wasn't. I wasn't cool, either. He could fake urbane and be cool, back then; today I can fake cool and be urbane. It's worked out.

Everything (almost) has worked out for Bob and me.

We are luckier than all the rest of you turkeys. That is because we are better than the rest of you turkeys. Voe doe dee oh doe.

He's coming down from Oakland for dinner with me on Sunday, so we talked today. We talk a couple or three times a week. If God hadn't wanted us to keep in such close touch, God wouldn't have given us the money to use long distance telephony so frequently. So we're talking. And I says to him, I says, "Yeah, I've got my reservations about *Star*

Wars, too, old chum, but I ain't so dumb: I bought Fox stock when it was at 8; it closed today at 22 1/2."

So Bob says to me, he says, "Sell."

"Nah, not just yet," I say, casually. "There are still lots of terminal acne 'Star Trek' whackos who haven't had their epiphany-conversion to *Star Wars* yet. I'll dump it when it hits 32."

Now Bob knows I don't know shit about stocks—unlike Himself who has a portfolio that would make the shade of J. Paul Getty envious—and he giggles at my punctiliousness. "Next, I buy TransAmerica," I say, "because they own United Artists, and when Coppolla's *Apocalypse Now* comes out, it'll go through the roof. In fact," I say, "buy some for me through your broker." He knows I'm such a yotz about stocks I don't have a broker, Shearson Hammill having washed their hands of me after that hedge fund debacle. "What's it going for now?"

"About 28," he says. "When I come down Sunday have twenty-eight hundred for me and I'll buy you two hundred shares."

"Okay," I say...and there's a moment of silence.

Then we're both laughing, righteously bugfuck, falling down.

"Hey, Bob," I gasp in a breathless voice, "guess what? I got 2 cents a word from Ziff-Davis today!" And we roar with laughter. Ain't we ludicrous. Ain't we silly. Ain't we beautiful. Just about twenty years ago the both of us were writing our asses off for pennies and hoping to make the rent. Here we sit today in our palaces, talking 200 shares of this and 200 shares of that.

He lived in a magnificent house in New York. Way up in Riverdale, a section of the Bronx that sounds as if it's one of the mythical areas of Ed McBain's 87th Precinct novels, but it isn't. It's New York. Some kind of terrific stately manse. It originally belonged to Fiorello La Guardia, "The Little Flower." But there was a bad fire and water damage and Bob had to write a lot of books to rebuild. Then he moved to California. Now he drives a car and raises cacti and he doesn't write any more.

That last part: that's your fault, in large part. I don't want to talk about that. Leave him alone. He's paid his dues.

For a long time, as well as we knew each other, I felt like his idiot kid brother, even though I'm six months older than Himself. He had it all together, had his life ordered, knew the magic vectors and the precise point where the winds of the universe merged. Then one evening he sat on the floor of my old office here at the Los Angeles house, and he cried. If it hadn't been his right to cry, I'd have hugged

him and rocked him and said, "It's okay, kiddo, the pain is okay."

And we're closer now. He's been through it with me a few times, and though I'm not much help—just keep telling him to bite the bullet—I'm going through it with him. Did you know he's been my best man at two of my marriages? Or has it been three? No, two; I'm sure it's only two.

I don't think we've ever gone to a movie together in all these years. Lots of dinners, but never a movie. Or roller skating.

There was one night, in Seattle I think, or maybe it was Pittsburgh, when I'd arranged for a "professional courtesy" dinner at a posh restaurant high up on a hill. We did that a lot in the days when we didn't have much money. We'd go to a science fiction convention and, while most fans were slugging down cheeseburgers and soggy fries at the hotel coffee shop, we'd be dining in gourmet splendor at this fabulous dinery or that elegant *boite*. It wasn't a ripoff, I actually did write a review of every restaurant that ever extended us a free meal. For *Rogue*, or *Topper*, or the Los Angeles *Free Press* or some other magazine. But this one night I'm remembering, there was a mix-up. I think there were six of us. I always passed Bob off as my wine expert, my *sommelier*. I had a date, Bob and Barbara, and two other people, maybe Charlie and Dena Brown. And there was a mix-up. They sent over an expensive bottle of wine with the compliments of the management, and Bob started getting twitchy, asking me, "Are you sure they understand this is on the cuff?" And I kept saying it's cool, leave it to me.

But when the check came, and it came to an empty table, and we were already out in the street, walking down to the car, and the manager came running after us, waving that goddamn check and screaming fraud fraud fraud...I went back to explain the way of the world to him...and that miserable fink Silverberg ran like a thief. Leaving me to face the wrath of the management. Doo dah.

He wears leather thong sandals. No socks. He has gone California native. I've lived out here for fifteen years and still wear socks and real shoes that cover my toes. I've never heard him sing or whistle; I'm not sure he can do either; isn't that peculiar. He knows the one thing about me I'm afraid to have revealed. I suppose I can trust him with it. He's never yet spilled the beans. Maybe he doesn't know he knows it.

There are scenes in *Nightwings* that can choke your heart. Don't anybody tell me he can't write emotionally. And *Thorns* is one of my favorite books. But he likes a lot less of my work than I like of his. That's okay, we're friends.

On my wall I have some framed pictures that remind me of stages

of my career, or moments of pleasure. A photo with Steve McQueen and a dune buggy on a 114 degree day in the low desert out near Thousand Palms.† A shot on the set of *Cimmaron Strip* with Stuart Whitman. A photo of me with Isaac and Janet† at some dinner party where I wore my fabulous \$400 chocolate brown velvet tuxedo. And one of Bob and me holding the Hugos we won on the same night. It was his first. He deserved it, but I conned him into believing I had logrolled to sway the vote. I didn't, of course, but it induced him to pay for dinner the next night. Let's see: I paid at Antonio's, he paid at Au Petite Cafe, I paid at Dar Maghreb, he paid at The Rangoon Racquet Club. Hmmm. Hey, Bob, you know your Hugo nomination this year, for *Shadrach in the Furnace*? Well, what's it worth to you if I, uh, er...

Here are some things you may not know about Robert Silberverg.

- As second President of Science Fiction Writers of America he was the man who got Sol Cohen of *Amazing Stories* to agree to pay writers for reprints of stories. Until that time, Sol was just filling up magazine after magazine with file stories most of us had gotten a penny-a-word for ten, twenty, thirty years before. Bob made money for many of us. Not much money, but found gold nonetheless.

- There has only been once in all the time he's been eating spicy food that it was too hot even for *him*. At a restaurant called Hunan Taste where we took Leslie Swigart and Stephanie Bernstein, and we asked the wizened Oriental gentleman to "make it as hot as he would for himself" and there we sat, eating, enjoying it enormously, tears of pain rolling down our cheeks.

- He has written about three times as many books as Asimov. Most of them are under other names, but Bob can still sit back with a gentle smile as Ike's publishers, madly driven to the last full decibel, trumpet Isaac's rapid closing on a 200th publication. And while Silgerverb novels have ceased their pullulation, even Creasey or Simenon would welcome him into the fratority of the prolific.

- He does not drink coffee or tea. He does not smoke, and never has. He doesn't like it when you do it around him.

•During the summers of the period 1951-54, he was a camp counsellor in West Cupcake, New York and, though it was a coeducational camp, he got laid infrequently.

•He is right-handed. I am left-handed. We are both Jewish.

•This will be the 25th consecutive Worldcon he has attended.

•He has only one discernible scar: on the back of his left hand. He got it in West Cupcake during a water fight when he did a smart thing in a stupid way. It used to be a bright red slash when he lived in New York, but since moving to the more salubrious California climate, it has become very faint.

•And here's one that's *bound* to get some stupid fan bent on insult into trouble: he does not like to be called "Robert," save by one or two people he's known for years who speak the word with overexaggerated officiousness.

None of these obscure facts are particularly interesting. The really good ones I'm keeping for his epitaph, on the theory if you can't speak ill of the dead, don't speak at all.

Bob's writing style is deceptively simple. It is very much his own voice, yet it has reverberations of the classic writers to whom we return for the pleasures of simply reading a good story: Hugo, Dickens, the best of James, Maugham, Dumas, Guy de Maupassant. It is Art; and because it is Art that functions at a level of expertise and craft perfected over several decades, it seems effortless, oversimplified, like Fred Astaire's dancing or Picasso's pen-and-ink sketches or John Lennon's compositions. It looks as though anyone could do it, that's how simple and easy it is...until the attempt is made and the novice falls on his ass.

Because of his parsimoniousness with the language, because of the calculated regimentation of plotting, because of the dispassion with

which Bob often unreeled his stories, the casual reader—whose taste has been brutalized too often by cheap pyrotechnics and disingenuous emotionalism—for many years thought of the work of Silverberg as pedestrian. Then, in the Sixties, he eschewed all that, and began writing novels that were awash with poignancy and darkness. Replacing charm, logic. In place of explosiveness, a rational progression of events leading to the emergence of a kind of voracious inevitability. Not cheap gag humor, but wit. Much pain and examination of the subtler aspects of the human condition.

Readers fled in horror.

Silverberg went out on the land and saw the audience he had idealized in his mind and in his Art, and they were demeaning themselves gladly with “sci-fi” and drivelbooks one notch up from comics. With *Star Trek* and *Perry Rhodan* and the blather of functional illiterates. Shaking his head in consternation and dismay, he stopped writing. And he was gone.

He has often been pilloried by the unperceptive for being slick, one who frequently dealt with gimmicks. But in his 1958 story of cannibalism, “The Road to Nightfall,” he was already probing at the essence of the human spirit. In “The Man Who Never Forgot” he spoke to the condition of alienation with which we all suffer. “To See the Invisible Man” meant much to its readers; so much, in fact, that it has been widely reprinted in high school text-anthologies; it is a universal story. “Passengers” was an early warning shot in the battle against the Anita Bryants of the world. What is your favorite...run off the names:

Nightwings, “Going Down Smooth,” *Tower of Glass*, *The World Inside*, “Ishmael in Love,” *Downward to the Earth*, “After the Myths Went Home,” “The Fangs of the Trees,” “The Feast of St. Dionysus,” *Son of Man*, *The Masks of Time*...my God, how the list goes on. There hasn’t been a year for almost two decades that the writer has not had final nominations in two and three categories of Nebula and Hugo awards. Is it any wonder that Barry Malzberg echoes those who know when he calls Silverberg “the best of us all.” No, it’s no wonder. And he may well be.

And he is gone.

Well, shit, that isn’t so. He’s alive and *very* well; perhaps weller than he’s been in a long time. He lives high in Oakland, dines well, moves around and sees brightly, and his personal life is no less tangled than it ever was, but there may be light at the end of his perceptions. One can only hope. And he’s entitled, fer chrissakes! Twenty-some years working behind a typewriter, a body of work most writers couldn’t parallel for quality and mass if they worked night and day for

fifty years, a contribution to our cultural self-awareness that few other fantasists can equal...he's *done* it. He's entitled to stop, or rest, or pack it in entirely, without rancor, without being chastised. The gift has been given; accept it without greedily demanding more. He's entitled. To live his life as he chooses. The work, once written, belongs to the reader. The writer belongs to himself.

Peace and time are commodities we all find in short supply. Bob has decided to take his full measure. He's entitled.

Anybody messes with him has to go through me.

And the one thing I am, that Siblerverg ain't, is mean.

He was naked beside the pool. So were the ladies. I had white ducks on. I didn't want to make him feel inadequate. It was the day before New Years Eve. The annual Terry & Carol Carr Eve party, to be followed by the annual New Years Day party of the Silverbergs. I was staying in the guest bedroom with the water bed. We were beside the pool, eat your heart out Kalamazoo and New York and Pittsburgh. End of December, beside the pool. Voe doe dee oh doe.

"Bob, take a look at this story."

"Not now, I'm being sybaritic."

"C'mon, man, just read the goddam thing. I know all the stuff is here, but it's gone and went wonky on me. It doesn't sing."

"It doesn't soar?"

"It doesn't swell with pride."

"It just lies there."

"Sucks is, I believe, the proper terminology. Take a look, willya. Tell me what I can do with it."

He read it. Then he held it over the water with thumb and forefinger. "This is what you should do with it."

He dropped it. On the poolside. I went red with anger. Cannot remember when I've been angrier. I grabbed it up and went to the guest bedroom where my typewriter was set up. I'd been working on that story for two years. That miserable sonofabitch! I'll show him!

I wrote all through the day, part of that night; started again the next day with the TV in the guest bedroom blaring the Rose Bowl behind me, with Terry and a dozen other partygoers yelling and drinking and in no way interfering with my concentration.

I reworked the story, snipped apart the sections, rewrote whole episodes, added eight thousand words, finished it the next day. He read it again.

"Not bad," he said. He isn't that high on most of my work.

"It's bloody dynamite," I said, with touching humility.

"Wrong. It's still wonky."

“It’s a classic. It’ll win a Hugo.”

“No way.”

The story was “The Deathbird.” Eat your heart out Silverbug.

I never had a brother. I have a sister, but with only two moments of pardonable insanity when I forgot how much I disliked her, I haven’t spoken to her in eleven years. But if I’d had a brother, he wouldn’t have been like Silverberg. Bob and I are too different; very few points of similarity. Yet we are linked. Don’t ask me why, don’t ask me how. It just is. He doesn’t know it, but he’s the executor of my estate. If I went tomorrow, I’d go secure in the knowledge that Bob would tend to every little detail of my demise. He’d grumble about it, and think ill of me for inconveniencing him by being hit by a truck or getting myself defenestrated, but he’d do it. Ours is a peculiar and disparate friendship, almost a quarter of a century concretized. But we are so dissimilar that I sometimes wonder what it is we have in common. Clearly, what we have in common, is each other.

In repose, his face resembles a Quechuan stele of the sleeping philosopher-soldier, something carved from the black rock of the steep slopes of the Cordilleras. His walk is easy; neither reminiscent of the cat nor of the rolling gait of the sailor, but loosely from the hips and the lower back. A textbook example of the laughter being primarily in the eyes; the mouth is often questionable. His lips are thicker than might be considered esthetically correct for the face. He has small ears. I remember him before the beard.

Women tell me he is good in bed. I think he is probably even better with women out of bed. That is a terrific thing to be able to say.

Politically, he would like to be more conservative than he is permitted to be, because of his constant exposure to those of us, his friends, who are wild-eyed radicals and knee-jerk liberals. I’m sure it causes him difficulty. He overintellectualizes too much sometimes. That is, no doubt, because he is an intellectual. He is also an elitist, but is too smart to flaunt it. His manner is quiet, and so his elitism seems acceptably patriarchal.

He seldom uses coarse language. He keeps cats.

His work will be read and admired fifty years from now. I’d make book on it.

Appreciation? How do I express appreciation for a man who has been part of my life since the days through which we marched as fans, he with his magazine *Spaceship*, me with *Dimensions*?

He wrote an appreciation of me for a recent issue of *The Magazine*

of *Fantasy & Science Fiction* that ended with a sentence I found making me cry. Not bawling, you understand, just sort of welling up a bit. There was love and bemusement and tolerance and amazement and frustration in that last sentence, and it was a genuine treasure.

If all of the above emotions and attitudes toward him, on my part, don't surface in this "appreciation," then either you as reader or I as writer failed in doing our job.

But for a parting shot, I'm forced to go to another writer for splendid words. It is a piece of an article about film director Sam Peckinpah, written by one of my few friends who is an actor: Robert Culp. You may not have known that Bob Culp is a brilliant writer, but to inform your awareness, here is this snippet of appreciation, written when Culp and Peckinpah were on good terms. I've been saving it for myself. If I could have anything ever said about anyone, said about me, as my epitaph, I would want it to be something like this.

It wasn't written about Silverberg, but you'll allow for the discrepancies, because the tone and the substance go right to the heart of my feelings about Silverberg.

"The similarities in character between Peckinpah and [John] Ford are not exactly lost on those who know them. He is Ford, come again just as mean, a little more mad, a little angrier, a little more vulnerable, perhaps a little more valuable to the people around him now, since he is absolutely the last of the breed. With him the line runs out. He is not the technical master of the form that Ford was, but his vision is greater and he is bolder, infinitely more reckless and self-destructive, and as a consequence very precious since he will be with us only a short time. And the body of his work will be smaller. It is very difficult for him to, in his incessant phrase, 'just get it on!' It costs him more to get the job done than any of the rest of us, and there's only so much currency, only so many feet and inches of entrail. [Robert Silverberg] is all alone just like the rest of us. Except that he knows it. He knows how terribly cold it is out there and he cannot come in. But he sends messages."

This appreciation is available in mono and compatible eight-track stereo. Voe doe dee oh doe.

ROBERT SILVERBERG: AN APPRECIATION

Same subject, six years later, and Harlan was in a different mood. This thoughtful piece accompanied the publication of several of Silverberg's stories in The Best of Omni No. 5. In a recent conversation, Harlan noted that this is the last tribute to Bob he intends to write. As with the Leiber essay (see "A Few Too Few Words") Harlan feels that one's credibility is strained by declaiming the virtues of one's friends time after time, so this is probably his last word on the subject of Silverberg.

More brightly than any other writer working in the genre of imaginative literature, Robert Silverberg reflects the conscience of our times.

Beginning his career in the fifties, Silverberg was a perfect manifestation both of the emergence of science fiction as a legitimate art form and the prevailing attitude of young people in America that success was the primary goal for an artist. If his early work is marked by a cool intelligence and an emphasis on solving the puzzle-problems set up by plot, it is likely as much a resonance with that period in our recent history when distancing from social commitment was the order of the day as it was the influence of John W. Campbell, who, as the most prominent editor of his era, set the parameters of the genre as consistent with his own concerns.

But in the mid-to late-sixties, beginning with such novels as *Thorns*, *Nightwings*, *The Masks of Time*, *Up the Line*, and *The Man in the Maze*, Silverberg's legendary prolificacy was turned almost feverishly to reinterpretations of the effects on human beings of runaway technology in a worlds whose soul was in peril. In those novels and the uncounted short stories that filled the chinks in the wall of *oeuvre* he was creating, Silverberg began to reach out through the veil of his intellectual solitude to touch that universal human spirit all serious artists must, inevitably, come to grips with.

From 1970 to 1974, a time of upheaval and metamorphosis in America, Silverberg's work reflected the angst and mortal dreads of the world around him. Massive changes over a decade had altered his view of his species, and of himself; and the work dealt more impressively than that of any other writer of the time with the great questions we had begun to ask ourselves. *Downward to the Earth*, *The World Inside*, *Tower of Glass*, *Son of Man*, *A Time of Changes*, *Dying Inside*, and *The Stochastic Man*—among a flood of others—became

deeply troubling icons for a generation of readers learning not only to live decently in their own skins, but who were at last coming to realize they were part of a human chain, each link of which was commanded to ask for whom the bell tolls.

In 1974 Silverberg was lashed into a realization that being point man for the human condition can be dangerous in the extreme. With the end of the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, the years of civil unrest rumbling to a close, America sought surcease. Weary from a decade of trying to reestablish pride in being a nation flawed but essentially humane, exhausted from the day-after-day struggle to banish the monsters in our midst, America fell gladly into the arms of trivial art; and the fickle audience decided it could not handle the deep-breathing demands Silverberg's uncompromising work placed on them. Turning their eyes back to what seemed (foolishly) an idyllic time, the audience wallowed in escapism of a sort that excluded the nourishment of spirit, the demand for personal responsibility, Silverberg proffered.

And so he went away. For five years he was not heard from, and the empty dreams of elfin creatures and unicorns held sophomoric sway over Silverberg's former constituency.

Those who knew him intimately were not insensitive to his pain. He went to the earth and he dined well and he maintained close friendships; but despite the sheen of complacency and comfort, it was obvious the surface was pitted with anguish. Beyond the gate there was only silence.

But as the times send some great artists underground to replenish their energies—often against their will—so the pressures of a changing world call those readers of the runes back when their time is come again. And as the eighties dawned, Silverberg made his resurgence. Invigorated, renewed, at once more thoughtful and more vulnerable, perhaps more human at having discovered he was not beyond the reach of rust, he has returned to the world of imaginative literature stronger and more important to our needs.

Reflecting in his ipseity† a thirty-year history of science fiction, and the scarred American character, Robert Silverberg returns to us larger than at his beginning or his leave-taking; wiser and more decent. Able to tell us that even when dark wings close down the sky the human spirit will prevail...if we but accept our kinship with seas and stones and the ghosts of our past.

CHEAP THRILLS ON THE ROAD TO HELL

This famous essay on The Common Man was written on assignment for the Los Angeles Times and appeared as a 1982 New Year's editorial. It was as a result of this piece that the publisher first approached Harlan with the idea of gathering his essays into the collection you're now reading.

We felt so good after seeing Fonda and Hepburn and Fonda in *On Golden Pond* that a bunch of us said, what the hell, let's cripple the exchequer and have dinner at Lawry's. Waitress named Ms. Anacker worked our table. Nice person, and responded well to our high spirits and dumb humor. She said it was a pleasure to have some well-meaning nut cases to wait on instead of all the sourpusses she'd been getting. She said it had been one mean Christmastime working this year's crowd. A lot of surly, a lot of cranky, much prune-faced snottiness.

We asked her why did she think it'd been like that? Why were folks so downcast and wrongheaded? She said, "Because they were angry they didn't have money to buy their kids toys this year." And she served the salad with the chilled forks.

Having been asked by the good gray *Times* to make some observations on the future roaring toward us down the Freeway of Life, vehicle number 1982 having just rear-ended and whiplashed us, I find myself with mind a-whirl and nails bitten to the quick. I am much like you. In the mistaken belief that just because I occasionally write fantasy stories extrapolating some bizarre future America I am privy to Delphic insights, the editors of the *Times* have asked me to unleash wry conceits about what we can expect. Little do they understand that writers are merely paid liars and we know no more than the rest of you. Nonetheless, noting that the last guy to tell you the truth—that Reagan's economic policies are a Balinese fire&boat drill—was David Stockman, and remembering what happened to *him*, I look backward in order to look forward.

Dr. Doolittle called such an animal the Push-Me-Pull-You.

We come out of 1981 and into the new year still paying the price for Vietnam and a plethora of assassinations. I hold Lee Harvey Oswald directly responsible for Richard Nixon, and I hold Nixon directly responsible for Carter and Reagan. Some small amount of bitterness attends these observations.

Mr. Reagan has spent a year carefully dismantling all the gains in

civil rights it took two decades to push through. He goes to retreat in the beautiful land above Santa Barbara but gives the rest of us the dubious gift of James Watt who seems hellbent on turning every available inch of watershed land into condos at a million-five per unit. He plays to insular fears and regional prejudices and that poisonous racism we cannot seem to boil out of our national character, and the ERA is in trouble, labor is unhappy, the Post Office raised its rates again when they were told not to, there's no money to clean the streets, and somewhere out there a crazed killer is lurching toward us to make us another point in the slaughter statistics because Mr. Reagan won't buck the National Rifle Association.

And you ask me to look toward the future and tell you that the tin woodman will get his heart, the scarecrow his brains, the lion his courage and that Dorothy's red pumps will get new halfsoles? Wrong and wrong. I cannot do that.

What I *can* do is tell you that this early in the Eighties we must come to accept some hard truths that fly in the face of what we have always believed about the American Character. Because, it seems to me, only by what Mr. Reagan calls "agonizing reappraisal" can we forego the cheap thrills and destructive mythology that have directed our steps down the road to Hell which is paved, as we all know, with unenlightened self-interest.

First off, he said, going for the jugular, we must get rid of the concept of the nobility of the Common Man (and Woman). In times past that stereotype was seen as Jimmy Stewart, stopping the mad dog lynch-mob from killing an innocent man. But as the late critic John Mason Brown once observed, "The Common Man is dangerously too common." The reality is that the Common Man was part of that lynch-mob. It was the *UnCommon* Man, the courageous and intelligent taker-of-risks, who was best personified by Stewart and Gary Cooper and Spencer Tracy.

It is the Common Man one hears eviscerating the English language during KNX's periodic opinion-in-the-street programs. The dull voices of those who, during the baseball players' strike, thought it was just awful, just terrible for those guys to be denying fans the pleasure of rooting for the team just because they wanted more money. Voices of those who, did they not get *their* contract demands at the plant or in the office, would have been on the pavement with placards in a hot second.

It is the Common Man one sees throwing a lit cigarette butt out the car window as we crawl up through the dry-brush canyons where the threat of fire lies heavy over the land. It is the Common Man who tells us the kitchen appliance we bought a year ago cannot be repaired, that it's cheaper to replace the whole unit, and here's a nice

one over here you can have for a mere \$79.95. It is the Common Man who stands as public monument, watching a sixty-five year old woman get her purse snatched, and then tells the cops, "I didn't want to get involved." It is the Common Man who thinks the space program of NASA has no merit because there are potholes in the streets of Watts. The same Common Man listens to Phyllis Schlafly and Jerry Falwell and the know-nothings who want to ban *Catcher in the Rye* from school libraries because it has dirty words in it. This too-common man and woman go on endlessly about the rabid ethnic types who cheat on welfare checks, who see rapists by the color of their skin, who lament the offing of their neighbors by their spouses with handguns, and see nothing wrong with cutting back lunches for school children.

These same Common Men and Women also cheat on their income taxes, manage to overlook the fact that William Bonin is white, frequent splatter movies in which women get icepicks in their eyes because it's "entertainment," and who applaud the expenditure of hundreds of thousands of dollars for that annual panegyric of bad taste, The Rose Parade, which hundreds of thousands could be used to buy school lunches if anyone really gave a damn.

I do not believe in luck. Louis Pasteur said, "Chance favors the prepared mind." I believe to my core that because we accept a view of the world around us that is shoehorned into a thirty-second squib on the "ABC Evening News," that we stumble through our lives being acted upon, rather than actually having anything to say about what our condition of life will be.

It is my conviction that the myth of the Common Man is outmoded and perilous for us to continue deifying. When, in 1982, there are people who actually believe the silly hogwash of "scientific creationists," who continue to think the death penalty will deter monsters such as those who shot down innocent hostages at a Bob's Big Boy, who think missiles and hardened silos will answer the threat of war, whose only acquaintance with ideas and the written word is through the pages of *TV Guide* or *The National Enquirer*...it is my perception that we will continue in the New Year to reap precisely what we have sown.

The time of thinking that intelligence and education and reasoning logically are useless qualities, fit only for eggheads, is past. We have had a decade of situational ethics, avoidance, non-involvement on a personal level of risk, response to the small problems and to the large with nothing but transient emotionalism. We have looked out for #1, we have gotten inside our own heads, we have used our space fer sure, and the point at which we find ourselves is at the crossroads, barefoot and as unknowing as children. Down one road lies more of

the same, a dark specter waiting to chop us off at the hips. Down the other lies mist and fog.

Neither road is one we would choose if there were a nice Hyatt where we could stay overnight. But the roads are empty, and we have to keep moving.

Both roads lead to the future; the only difference is in the choice of walking the one with Pasteur and the Catcher in the Rye, or the other with the Common Man.

And I don't trust that sucker any more than you do.

TRUE LOVE: GROPING FOR THE HOLY GRAIL

The following details Harlan's 1978 experience with a video dating service on assignment for Los Angeles magazine. As usual, however, Harlan takes on larger issues than just making it on the singles scene.

I have this terrific theory. It's all about how we stop *schlubs* like Son of Sam or Richard Speck or Charlie Manson or William Calley or the Hillside Strangler from killing people.

It goes like this: We live in a kind of berserk, wonky Show Biz Society. For the mass of people living ordinary, just-let-me-make-it-through-the-week lives, the denizens of the flash&glitter set who appear on the Johnny Carson show are more substantial, more real, than their neighbors or their families.

Whom Jackie-O is dating this month has more relevance to readers of the *Star* or *People* than the fact that their butcher was recently admitted to the Carrville Leprosarium with Hansen's Disease. Zsa Zsa Gabor on fiscal responsibility and Debbie Boone on pollution have more impact than the most recent thoughts of Nader or Bucky Fuller. Every woman sees Mr. Goodbar as George Segal or Paul Winfield or Clint Eastwood or a phosphor-dot variation therefrom emanating; every man is seeking Ms. Juicy Fruit in the image of Raquel Welch or Farrah Whatserface or Donna Summer. Or etcetera.

So here's a pudgy, bland little doughnut like Son of Sam, drudging away his life in the Post Awful (which sinecure would drive even a well-adjusted person out of his brain), and day by day, night by night he's drenched with celebrities, none of whom have opinions or *de facto* worth any more valid than his own. But *he's* a cipher, a nothing, a nobody; he can't escape that realization. He's a doughnut, and no one will pay any attention to him; nobody'll throw a party or a parade for him. Frustration, lack of self-esteem, the pressure of everyday life, and he simply ain't making it. Hey, *look* at me! he screams silently. But all he gets is jostled and shoved on the crowded sidewalks. So he goes out and gets some attention...by blowing people away.

No need to say he's an exception, the manifestation of a "disturbed" personality. Whaddaya think, I'm a dummy? *I* know he's disturbed. But if you gave him ten minutes of late night prime-time on Carson, he'd never kill anybody. He'd feed off that notoriety for years. It might not turn him into Albert Schweitzer, but at least he wouldn't be out there fracturing the peace and sanity of the world.

Being on teevee is the secret lust-dream of the American People. Television is, in sad fact, the new reality. What happens on the tube really happens...what goes down in the perceived world is iffy; maybe it's real, maybe not.†

And that's one of the most important reasons why a videotape dating service like Great Expectations is so damned successful and does such a good job of bringing people together in what we laughingly term The Dating Pool.

My friend Sherry, the Sherry who runs the bookstore, not the Sherry who can't get a steady job or the Sherry who is an interior decorator, said to me one day about a year ago, "I joined a videotape dating service; it's really terrific; I've met a gang of interesting men. You ought to go over there."

My first thought was that she was making what I took to be a not-so-subtle chop at my not having found a steady lady friend since the most recent divorce. But as it turned out, she only wanted me to indulge my curiosity. She thought I'd find it interesting. Well, I uttered the expected "yucchhh" at the thought of signing up for some artificial system of companion-procurement, and that was that.

Couple of weeks later I received a letter from something called Great Expectations. It was a form letter headed

THE END OF THE BLIND DATE...

and it suggested that if I had sated myself wasting away my life looking for love-mates in singles bars, groups or parties, I might be ready for Great Expectations.

But since I don't drink, I have never been in a singles bar (yes, my guilty secret is out at last). Belonging to groups makes me nervous (I can barely handle my membership in the Book-of-the-Month Club). And as for parties, ever since the mass of my friends discovered dope (which nasty substances will never pollute my precious bodily fluids), I haven't been invited to a get-together. I'm sure that's the reason.

And I was about to roundfile the letter, along with the bulk mail that offered me parcels of land in the more remote areas of Tannu Tuva or the Orinoco Basin, come-ons to buy vegetable choppers, and the possibility of subscribing to a magazine concerned solely with bathroom equipment, when I noticed a handwritten addenda at the bottom of the form letter. It read, "We invite you to a *free, private* viewing of our program...& members...It costs nothing!"

Some weeks later, I had occasion to find myself at Sherry's bookstore, which is on Westwood Boulevard, which is just up the street from the address where Great Expectations said True Love, The

Holy Grail, waited for me and, well, one thing and another, with an hour to kill, so why the hell not, you know how it is, er, uh, mmmm...

And I walked down to Great Expectations at 1516 Westwood Boulevard; and it was there, oh moment of karmic destiny, that I found the most perfect device ever conceived in aid of one's groping toward The Holy Grail, sometimes mugged and printed under the AKA, True Love.

Great Expectations is not a computer dating service. It is not a photo dating service. It is not a referral service. And it sure as hell isn't your *tante* Sophie fixing you up with this "very cute girl with a swell personality." It is the very apotheosis of the Age of Emotional Technology. It is selecting a companion from a videotape interview and a written profile, and though it may be as flawed a system for finding True Love as the ancient and venerable art of the *shadchen* or Chinese marriage contracts between infants, as far as I can tell, it cuts down the potential for catastrophes in a big way.

It is a business. It is run for profit. That seems to distress some people. (One such troubled soul is John Ettinger, an independent television documentary producer who did a segment of Channel 7's "Eyewitness Los Angeles" on Great Expectations recently, and who seemed hideously distressed that the service wasn't run like the Midnight Mission. More on Mr. Ettinger, and the hypnotic effect Great Expectations has on the weak-willed, later. Stay tuned.) Nonetheless, it is difficult for the average person contemplating a "dating service" to get past the stigmatized mythos of "paying" for the search for True Love. If one considers how much is paid in emotional coin, in the wear-and-tear give-and-take of most social liaisons embodying the Search, the cost of a membership in Great Expectations' service seems reasonable. But trying to explain the price structure in coherent terms is about as easy as filling out an IRS "short form."

But I'll try. Just not yet, please. It takes some working up to. For the nonce, let me tell you of the scene, and how I was embroiled in same at the behest of *Los Angeles* magazine, may its circulation increase.

Jeffrey Ullman is twenty-seven, happily married, and finds himself precariously poised on the precipice of financial success. He was twenty-five, happily married and impecunious when he had the moment of *satori* in which Great Expectations was born.

Ullman graduated from Berkeley in 1972 with a B.A. in Independent Journalism. His senior thesis was titled, "Getting on TV:

If Not You...Then Who?" For the two years following his graduation he was a Video Documentarian. What that means—in a time when garbage collectors throw *dreck* as Sanitation Removal Consultants—is that he produced, wrote and directed low-energy-level documentaries for schools: over thirty in five years. But when a NEA grant came to an end in 1974, Ullman found himself back in Los Angeles without a pot.

At a dinner party thrown by his parents in September of 1975, Ullman overheard a conversation between his mother and a friend of the family, an attractive, successful, 28-year-old female record company executive, recently come to Los Angeles from New York. She was lamenting the sorry state of dating here in the City of the Angels. Though she had met many men and had no lag-time in her social life, she could not find "that certain someone." Because she was an exceptionally attractive woman, she was constantly being hustled; but there was no click, no knight on a white charger; she had not been, in the words of Mario Puzo, "struck by the thunderbolt." Ullman listened to this not unfamiliar lament, and its coda, from his mother, who observed that an inability to find suitable companions afflicted her older friends who were recently widowed.

Later that night, driving home from the dinner party on the Santa Monica Freeway, wracking his brain for a way to put his video experience to work profitably here in Los Angeles, the conversation of earlier kept intruding.

Not even Aristotle could codify the nature of the creative act, and so it escapes both Ullman and me precisely what synaptic relay was suddenly closed, that produced the circuit linkage. But in that moment, on the Santa Monica Freeway, Ullman perceived the natural extrapolation of using videotape as a device for bringing people together. That the linkage was produced out of a need to make an honest living should in no way demean its importance.

I mean, who knows what venal impetus directed Albert Einstein's thoughts toward the space-time equations?

Ullman began researching the possibilities of a service that would employ video technology in aid of this most basic human need. Fifty to sixty hours a week were spent hip-deep in sociology texts, magazine articles about singles, books on social anthropology, psychology, telecommunications and, fruitlessly as it turned out, source material on how to run a dating service.

Funding was obtained from his parents and from a darkly mysterious background figure whose name I have sworn to keep to myself on pain of having my "I" key broken off the typewriter. Mr. Mysterious doesn't matter, anyhow, because he was bought out three months later, to the vast relief of Ullman and his parents.

And so, on Leap Year Day, February 29th, 1976, Great

Expectations opened shop.

Almost two years later, the membership is nearing 600 (52% male, 48% female) and what the Ullmans call “the relationship store” has a backlog of over one hundred and fifty videotape cassettes, each holding the life-essence of four or five seekers. Five highly-sophisticated Sony Betamax SLO-320’s flicker from noon till eight Mondays through Fridays and twelve to five Saturdays and Sundays. Through the 1550 feet of office space that were private apartments in the Karno Building twenty years ago, pass seekers after the Ultimate Truth, the Holy Grail, AKA True Love.

To this Valhalla of unanswered needs and unfulfilled dreams I came, wide-eyed and as close to innocent as four marriages and a lifetime of brutalization permitted.

There are over two million stories in the City of the Naked Angels. Mine is one of them.

To begin with, Randy Newman notwithstanding, tall people get me very cranky. Because of their insecurity at their *yeti*-like monstrosity, they have long engaged in a dire conspiracy to inconvenience those of us who are normal height, that is, five foot five or under. This conspiracy manifests itself in the height at which kitchen cabinets are built, the dispatching of six footers with enormous naturals who sit in front of us at movies, the inability to get a decent suit of clothes without shopping in the cadet section of C&R Clothiers, and other such indignities.

Jeff Ullman is six foot two.

I walked up the stairs at Great Expectations and was met by this great shambling hairy creature, who introduced himself as the gentleman who had sent me the come-on letter.

Maybe not cranky. Let’s just say I was underwhelmed.

In case you’ve lost the thread, I was on Westwood Boulevard, having an hour to kill, sorta, kinda, and thought I’d check out this weird dating service my friend Sherry had obviously touted onto me. “Oh, so *you’re* the famous writer I’ve heard so much about,” Ullman said, winning me to his cause instantly by striking at my weakest point: cheap appeal to vanity.

We sat down and he managed to outline the program at Great Expectations in between long bouts on the telephone with members who were calling in to exclaim jubilantly about their dates of the night before. To a man who had not had a date in six weeks, it was enormously depressing.

We talked for a while, and I was bemused. The odd mating rituals of the natives have always intrigued me. Despite his height, I rather

liked Ullman. He did not try to con me into believing he was ramrodding *Great Expectations* out of a selfless dedication to the betterment of the human race. It was clear he was a businessman who had come up with an interesting, very likely workable way to deal with one of the most basic of human hungers: the need for companionship and love. But he had verve and enthusiasm, and a warped sense of humor that reminded me of my own, except taller.

So I thought I'd write an article about videotape dating. I write a lot of fantasy, in the general course of things, and surely this was a recent, fantastic phenomenon in the uses to which technology could be put in service of the commonweal. Jeff Ullman thought that was a peachy idea.

But the nature of my romantic life is so complex that I felt I should divorce myself from the actual dating process at *Great Expectations*; I felt a detached view, written with a wry manner, winsome but puckish, would be the most truthful. I mean, what if I got embroiled in dating *Great Expectations* members and, because I'm such a wimp, they all turned out badly? Then I'd be writing about *me* and not about the service, which might be a little bit of sensational for everybody else who's normal. No, I decided, this was going to be straight reportage. No Tom Wolfe or Hunter Thompson personal gonzo journalism. The unadorned reality. Sure.

Ullman was having none of it. Nor was the other Geoff—Miller, who edits *Los Angeles* magazine. They both insisted I actually memberize myself; actually put my face and mouth on a videotape; actually fill out a member profile; actually solicit dates with all those numbered women in the profile books; actually allow female persons to see my tape, read my profile and, if they were the sort of people who had taken leave of their senses, request dates with me.

They insisted that was the only honest way *really* to do a solid piece of investigative journalism. Ullman kept speaking of involvement and commitment; Miller kept hinting about the need for more and better consumer protection, the need to make certain we weren't sending the love-starved Los Angeles hordes—pathetic lemmings of lust hellbent on hurling themselves over the precipice of romance—to a shuck-and-jive operation. He also said he'd pay me a decent rate for the article, rather than the parsimonious sums usually doled out to the beanfield hands who traditionally write for Miller.

Naturally, public service and a dedication to the tenets of foursquare honest journalism swayed me. Or, as Bertolt Brecht put it, "Each day I journey to the market place where lies are bought; hopefully, I take my place among the sellers."

And so, dear friends, once more into the breach, if you can keep your minds out of the gutter, thank you.

First I filled out the member profile. Reproduced on pages 181–182 is the actual form.

Then Jeff Ullman took me into the “interview room.” Very chummy, very comfortable, very put-you-at-your-ease even though everyone looks ten pounds heavier on videotape. The camera is hidden. The setting is a book-lined room (crummy selection of book club editions, random studies of the sewer system of Kenosha, Wisconsin, a few Harold Robbins potboilers with obscene remarks scrawled functional-illiterately in the margins; a selection distinguished solely by the presence of Leo Rosten’s *The Joys of Yiddish*). A pair of comfortable leather and wood chairs, knockoff imitations of a Saarinen design. Plants. Soft light. An okay room.

Jeff scrawls “Harlan” on a square of paper in block letters and pins it to the wall behind my head as I sit in the interviewee chair. It will be omnipresent on the tape so any woman running my cassette will remember and know to ask for me by my trade name. I can understand that: Redford and I are so often mistook for one another.

Then he interviews me. I don’t even hear the tape begin to run. All very easy and comfortable.

The questions are humorous and searching and quite intelligent. None of this, “What’s your favorite food” or “Do you like to do it with whips and chains, wet towels and coat hangers” kind of interrogation. Not even “What’s your sign?” Jeff asks me what I want to be when I grow up. I say William Randolph Hearst. Jeff asks me what my secret dream is. I tell him owning San Simeon. Jeff asks me why I’ve been married and divorced four times. I fwow up.

No, really.

Ullman is good. He could always put in a few years of lay analyst training and become a creditable therapist, in the event the Federal Trade Commission runs him out of business. He is gentle and easygoing, no stress and no feeling you’re being grilled by Kojak. But he probes and works instinctively with body language, reticences and facial illumination revealed by the subject being questioned. And as I’ve seen from evidence of many interviews in the cassette files, he gets men and women to come out of hiding naturally. Jeff’s mother also does interviews, and while there is a somewhat noticeable tendency on the part of interviewees to respond to Estelle as one would to a kindly aunt or to the supervisor of the complaint department at the May Co., she has the touch, too.

I had decided that I would set up some ground rules for myself in this matter. First, I would be utterly candid and open when cutting the tape. No “putting on my party manners.” I would expose myself as the arrogant elitist swine I truly am. Second, I would not request women

for dates because that would merely be to reflect *my* tastes and inclinations. Third, I would accept any and all dates for which *I* had been chosen, God willing. Fourth, I would advise any woman requesting me that I was doing this article, so they'd know it upfront and wouldn't feel as if they had been duped to the ends of journalism under the guise of romance.

But even though I cut a very blunt and arrogant tape, Jeff Ullman was able to bring out the jellylike core of my being. All unknowing, I revealed the soft, sweet pussycat that slumbers beneath this wretched, obnoxious, contentious anthracite facade. It wasn't a bad tape. *I'd* have dated me if I'd been an extremely intelligent woman. With a death wish.

The taped interview took about seven to ten minutes. I've never timed it, but the Great Expectations flyer says the actual length of a taped interview is from three to five minutes. If that's accurate, and if mine was no longer than the average, then Ullman is even better at this little prying game than I thought: my tape seems to be much longer than that. But then, how time drags when you're in the company of a bore.

And when it was done, Jeff ran it for me, so I could see what it looked like. One take. No reshooting. I'm a quick study; but then, I've got being me down pat. Type casting. For good or bad, I said, "Put it on the line."

(It should be noted that a member *can*, in fact, retape if dissatisfied with the initial result. During the first week of membership the tape can be viewed an unlimited number of times by the subject him/herself...and friends and relatives can be brought in to assay the effectiveness...random polls among people on the street can be taken...one can satisfy one's paranoid needs ceaselessly for the first week, and the tape can be re-cut free. It can be re-cut at the member's option *any* time thereafter, but Ullman charges a fifteen dollar time and nuisance charge; which seems reasonable when one considers how many people want to cut new tapes after having their hair or nose bobbed, their mustache shaved off, their consciousness raised by some good dope on the weekend or have reached a state of cosmic wonderfulness through *est* or Scientology or by sitting naked in -37 degree F., crosslegged, doing Indian chants and breathing deeply. At the member's option...new tape. That'll be \$15, please.)

My member profile went into the book containing men whose first names began with "H," my tape went back into the cassette cabinet, and I was assigned the member number "666."

"Uh, Jeff," I said, huckleberrily, trying to seem frivolous and not a pain in the ass, "did you know, just as a matter of incidental intelligence, heh heh, that the biblical symbol for the Antichrist is six

sixty-six? I mean, ha ha, the number of the beast is 666...did you know that? Just thought I'd mention it; nothing serious you know; just heh heh ha ha...*did you know that?*"

The pudding laughter congealed in my throat. Ullman wasn't laughing. "Yeah," he said offhandedly, printing "666" on my member profile, "I've heard that. Fascinating coincidence, isn't it?" And I was a member of Great Expectations, just like that. Fascinating coincidence. In the light of subsequent events, did Jeff Ullman—numerically speaking—know something I didn't?

Let us pause for a moment and speak of love. Not even True Love. Just plain old grass roots common variety love. Theodore Sturgeon once ventured the opinion, "There's no absence of love in the world; only worthy places to put it." Since each of us is a place to put it, and since each of us from time to time is less than 100% worthy, I guess Ted had it down right.

Some day soon I'm going to write a fantasy about the search for True Love. About this guy who knows such a thing exists. Not the idealized, gothic novel gobbledy-bibble idea of it, but an actual, literal, real-life thing that is True Love. And he searches all over the world, goes to the top of Mt. Everest to consult the mysterious guru, dabbles in the black arts, consults ancient texts, and finally gets on to a trail that promises to lead to True Love. And when he finally finds it, what it turns out to be is a big bowling trophy, a huge, tacky loving cup thing with T*R*U*E*L*O*V*E*! engraved on it in florid, incredibly gauche lettering, all caps and curlicues and exclamation points.

I just haven't figured out what he does with it.†

And that's the problem with love. Once you have it, and you *know* you have it...what the hell do you do with it?

It seems to me (he said, stroking his Solomonic beard) that all but a fraction of the time we spend concerned with love is dissipated in the search; and very little thought is expended in consideration of how to use it, or let it use us, once we've got it. Thus, the search becomes easier and more involving. Idealized candy is infinitely sweeter than actual candy eaten. Diabetes, tooth decay, the mid-gut carbohydrate spread...actualized love can do it to you.

And so, while I don't *really* think it's easier to find love in, say, Samoa or Lapland than it is in Los Angeles, we do have the reputation here for chasing the Holy Grail more frenetically than they do in the provinces.

If this is so, then I don't think it merely a fascinating coincidence that Great Expectations has flowered here in what a bad musician has cheaply dubbed "The City of the One Night Stands." I think L.A. is the

cutting edge of American social mores, and I think that Great Expectations is a solid manifestation of our need to find a new way to cut through the fetid jungle growth of Calvinist barriers that has always impeded us in the search for love. I found, to my pleasure—and in contradiction of my basically cynical, misanthropic view of the human race—that Great Expectations and what it says about the bold spirit of Los Angeles is a very positive and humanistic enterprise.

I continue to hold that belief, despite what happened to me when the job-lot called Harlan Ellison went on the market at Great Expectations. Call me hopeful; call me naive; call me Pollyanna; call me a poor benighted sailor on the seas of romance, tossed by the turbulent tides of lust and human frailty. Call me verbose and let's get on with it.

In the mail, less than a week later, were three postcards.
Please come in for a viewing. You have been requested by G.
Please come in for a viewing. You have been requested by K.
Please come in for a viewing. You have been requested by D.

That isn't quite the way the cards read, but it's close enough. Initials weren't used; the cards had first names on them. I won't even tell you the first names. Look: no matter how flippant I may seem here, these were all nice women who took a chance with me; and while some or all or none of them were right for me, or I for them, they made their move toward liaison with open hands and honest intentions. And while I'll play for chuckles in these anecdotes, I'll not gossip or hold them up to public ridicule. We are *all* weird, every one of us, in small and usually harmless ways. But in a court of law there isn't one of us whose minor quirks wouldn't seem sly and kinky and possibly perverse. So when you're ready to reveal that secret thing you have hidden in the back of your underwear drawer, back there under the rolled socks or the pantyhose, that secret thing you'd rather burn in hell forever than let anyone know is there, when you're ready to have it published with a big picture on the front page of the *Times*, at that time I'll tell you who the women were, the women I'll refer to only by bogus initials. If you want cheap thrills go stick your thumb in a light socket.

Where was I?

So I went in to view the tapes of the women who had requested me. On a sunny afternoon I drove down to Westwood and climbed the stairs to the cheery offices of Great Expectations. Estelle was there, and as I walked in I was greeted by a look on her face I've come to know very well. It's Estelle's "Have I got a girl for you!" look. I have

come to know and fear that look.

She sat me down in one of the armchairs, plonked one of the fat notebooks containing female member's profiles on my lap and said, "G. is at the back of the book. She's only been a member for a month. Very intelligent."

How she knew which one I'd check out first, and more improbably, how she was able to remember who had asked for a date with me, among the hundreds of selections passing over her desk in a week, is something I've never fathomed. But the clue to how Estelle can do it—and she's done it many times, I've seen her—and *why* she does it, lies in the response I give to people who ask me, "How can you be so high on such a dehumanized, mechanical way of meeting people?" That reply, and that clue, a little further on. Right now I want to maintain the narrative flow.

I flipped through the loose-leaf pages. Rachel S-64, Denise S-117, Betty S-286. Past woman after woman; younger women, older women; stouter women, thinner women; innocent looking women, bold looking women; chic women, reserved women. And I understood that much as we feel compelled to play the "person in his/her own right" lip-service game, in the first burning instants that we meet someone who is a potential vessel of True Love, we are as one with the naked ape. It is *always*, in those first trembling moments, the aesthetic of line and curve and hollow and solid flesh that widens our eyes and raises our temperature. The subliminal message of certain body-heats, the flush of health, the movement of a slim hand through certain-colored hair, the horizon line of a smile that speaks of far lands ready for exploration. What culturally-hip hypocrites we are: talking of wit and wisdom, of good deeds and similar interests, when our chimes ring first and loudest for the high cheekbone, the tight little ass, the strong chin or the quick flash of crossed leg. It's nice to delude ourselves that we move in the stately pavane of the social contract, but if we listen carefully we can hear the murmurs of the veldt and the jungle near at hand.

I am no nobler than you: G. was an attractive woman. I looked at her photo on the back of the sheet before I turned it over and read the member profile.

She liked books, wasn't too interested in sports, enjoyed far traveling; there were oblique references to a delight in word-play and hard work; she was in her middle thirties; she was divorced with children. Intimations of strong character and a pragmatic view of the world. The portents were good.

I ran her tape.

Attractive, a trifle hyper in a nervous way (but that might be

attributed to the setting, the interview), easy to smile, charmingly cynical sometimes; and the body language and facial giveaways spoke to a promising sensuality.

All this, from the profile and a seven minute tape. Not an unlikely weight of evidence if one spends any part of one's life watching people, checking out the somatotypes, cataloguing the secret messages our bodies send.

I read the other two member profiles; the one for K. and the one for D. I studied the photographs.

In the course of preparing to write the article, I had scanned many hours of taped interviews, both men's and women's. Not just women I found personally attractive by those undefined and secret jungle messages; but older women who were widowed or divorced, who were clearly seeking older men for companionship; younger women whom I knew would be outside my range of interests because of their youth; black women who probably wouldn't want a honk; overweight women and women whom I didn't respond to at all physically. And a lot of men's tapes, to get a sense of balance, to find out whether the myth that only losers signed up for dating services had any substance. My finding: if there were losers in that group I viewed, they certainly didn't reveal it on tape. I saw women who were poised and charming, vivacious and coquettish, intelligent and witty. And though I prefer the company of women, the men I viewed were equally as interesting. There were weaker and stronger men, of course; men I suppose women would find handsome and men whose characters were more attractive than their faces; but very very few of them had that gray Kirlian Aura of desperation and doom.

My finding: it was probably as statistically average a group of winners and losers as one would get if one scooped a hundred men and women off any Los Angeles suburb's streets.

The three women whose tapes and profiles I scrutinized, were no more nor less than the others. They seemed rational and together. The only thing that made me suspect they might be odd in the head was their selection of the man who had cut that arrogant, off-putting tape.

So now I had come down to the crunch point.

Here was where all the objectivity of my research into Great Expectations could go wrong. Understand: I am like the pessimistic kid in the old story, the one they put in a room filled with toys, who is observed an hour later, crying like crazy because he's sure someone will come and take them away; while in the next room the optimistic kid, who was put in with a giant mound of horse pucky, is burrowing through the shit laughing and yelling, "There has to be a pony!" I do not really believe in True Love. I am a cynic. And you can take me at my word when I say that I extrapolated in every possible direction to

find a negative aspect of videotape dating.

I could find none.

Therefore, if things went less than sensationally, the fault *had* to lie in me, or in people who would be attracted to someone like me. Which, of course, was the case.

So as I launch into the denouement of this escapade, understand that what you get from this point on is highly subjective Ellisonian vision. *Caveat emptor*.

I ran K.'s tape. She was a set designer at one of the major studios. I was not drawn to her physically, but her manner was so gracious, and her responses to the questions the interviewer put to her, that I felt I would very much like to meet her, to get to know her as a friend.

I ran D.'s tape. An absolutely stunning young woman. I was smitten with her looks. But as her tape rolled, I realized she was all wrong for me. She was too nice.

Do I detect the raised eyebrow? Do I perceive the hum of confusion? Let me explain.

D. was a *sweet* woman. Not simpy, saccharine sweet, with that cloying, phony manner that conceals another personality altogether, but *nice*, a good person who, because of her innocence (not naivete, innocence, something quite different) was terribly vulnerable. It has been truly said of me that anything that gets in my way gets a Harlan-sized hole through it. It's happened in personal relationships. I suppose it could be called strength; it can also justly be called insensitivity or ruthlessness or unbridled self-interest.

Whatever it's called, I'm aware of it, I despise it in myself, and I try to be responsible as best I can force myself to be, by not getting mixed up with people whom I'm going to clobber.

By the time the tape ended, I knew that if I were to get involved with D., in short order I would chew her up and cause her grief. So I decided, no matter *what* I'd set as the ground rules, I was not going to see this woman whose decency and kindness radiated from the videotape playback machine.

I said okay to K. and G., got their home and work numbers from Estelle and then, as I was turning away, having said, "Advise D. I'm unavailable," I said, "Let me have D.'s number and I'll call her and thank her, tell her I'm doing an article, and let her know my not accepting a date with her has nothing to do with *her*."

Estelle smiled that knowing smile, and I went in the other room and called G. and made a date. K. did not answer her home phone, and locating her at the studio was difficult. I put her numbers away for later. Then I called D.

"Hello?"

"Hi, this is Harlan Ellison. You ran my tape at Great

Expectations?”

“Oh, hello. That was just the other day. I wasn’t expecting to hear from you so soon.” A sweet, warm voice. My heart melted. I kicked myself in the ass intellectually and warned myself, don’t let your gonads rule your brain, turkey!

“Well, listen, I, uh, I came in today and ran your tape...”

Silence at the other end. Expectant silence.

(Hold it a minute. Dammit, I hate to break up the flow right at “the good part,” but here’s something that should be pointed out. Great Expectations is terrific in one respect, if no other. The way the system has been set up, there is virtually *no rejection*. If someone runs a tape and decides he or she doesn’t want to respond to that person’s request, no one says, “He didn’t want to go out with you.” Instead, if you turn down a request, the other person is advised you “are not available.” No more is said. *Not Available* really does mean the person requested is dated up, is seeing someone regularly, is going inactive, is out of town, has come out of the closet...whatever. For all but those too paranoid even to sign up for Great Expectations, a “not available” means no points lost, means you’re still acceptable, means no one has looked upon you and found you unworthy. It wholly and totally eliminates the crushing aspects of swimming in the dating pool.)

“...I ran your tape, and uh I thought you were very nice, and God knows you’re beautiful, but uh er I don’t think you really want to go out with me.”

“I don’t?”

“No, I’m sure you wouldn’t like it.”

“Why do you say that?”

And I realized my tricky, duplicitous, sly and treacherous nature had outwitted me again. Of *course* she would be intrigued by such remarks. Which shows you what a swine can lie so close beneath the surface of even those of us who *want* to be responsible. Instead of simply having Estelle tell D. I was “not available,” I’d set up a situation where I had to go out with her or make her feel rejected, thereby defeating the sane and sensible Great Expectations system. I had used my privileged relationship with Estelle and Jeff—a journalist gathering material—to get a phone number I should, by all rights, have been denied.

“I say that because I can see from your tape that you’re just too nice a woman.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

God, this was impossible! I was trying to ride two horses at the same time.

“Look: I don’t know you very well, just what I got from the profile

and the tape, but I can tell from *my* past that a woman as nice as you would only be miserable going out with me.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve been me a long time. I *know*.”

“That’s a pretty negative attitude.”

“I don’t mean it to be. I mean it to be positive. I assure you, nothing would please me more than to meet you; if nothing else, you are an absolutely dynamite looking woman.”

“And smart, too,” she said. I chuckled. Yeah, smart, too.

“Nonetheless. It wouldn’t be a good thing. See, I’m doing this article on Great Expectations and—” I laid out the background. And by so doing intimated that I was *afraid* to date her because I might actually get involved, which wasn’t anywhere in the ground rules.

“Why don’t you give me a chance?” she said.

Now let us pause for a hot second, folks. Examine that sentence, in the light of the situation. *Give me a chance*.

Jeezus, that’s all *any* of us want! A shot at the Holy Grail. Just let me get *near* the bloody thing, let me know it exists, let me make my best move. And *that* is the big secret of why Great Expectations works like a Swiss watch. Remember I said there was a response I give to those who ask me why I’m so high on Great Expectations, an artificial system of meeting possible mates? Here is that response:

When you need a job...when you’re so goddam desperate to pay those bills, to bring a little food into the house, to be employed and not an out-of-work bum that you can taste it...employers smell it on you. We are, remember, close to the veldt and the jungle. We can smell desperation on each other. We can smell the loser. And the more desperate you get, the harder it is to get that job. Employers don’t want those who stink of failure. It shines out of the eyes, it permeates our sweat, it reveals itself subliminally in the body language we employ all-unknowing.

And the more rejections we get, the worse gets the desperation. And the cycle continues.

The same in love. Have you ever noticed: when you’re in love, or getting laid regularly, or content with your current situation, potential lovers come out of the woodwork? You can’t beat them off with sticks. But when you’re dumped fresh and pink and squalling out of a scene with someone, and you go back into the dating pool, you can’t get anyone to respond to you no matter how hard you try. And you *do* try. Desperately. Frantically.

Here’s the philosophy, folks: we spend most of our lives in pursuit of two ephemeral wraiths. The first is security. I promise you: there is no genuine security this side of the grave. And that’s okay. If we get

secure, we get stagnant. We stop reaching, we stop creating, we stop growing.

The second utterly worthless goal we grope toward is *looking good*.

Got to look good. Got to look sharp. Got to prevent rejection. Got to keep up that feeling of worthiness. God forbid our clothes are a little shabby, God forbid our nose leaks in public, God forbid the haircut came out lousy and we don't feel beautiful. In a society maddened by youth and *looking good*, to be less than scintillant is to get the dregs of life, to swim alone and unloved in the dating pool.

And so, when we cruise those parties, those singles bars, those blind dates set up by our friends, we have to wear the mask of *I'm not really looking*. We have to play at being all booked up, at being so popular it's only an amusement for us to be receptive to the offers of a stranger. God forbid he or she thinks we're available. We're phonies of the worst sort. We lie with everything in us, but our bodies and our desperation give us away.

But at Great Expectations that's stricken from the record. By the single act of putting yourself on tape, you say, "I'm looking." You say, "I'm here, for good or bad; and I want something meaningful in my life. I don't want to die unloved and alone." Everyone on those tapes, popular and unpopular, attractive and plain, male and female, is stating by his or her presence: I'm open and receptive. That is personal bravery. And by destroying that barricade, the videotape dating program uses software technology to establish human relationships. *That's* what I found out about Great Expectations. and that's why I think it's sensational.

It is a direct and open way of saying *Give me a chance*.

Which is what D. said to me.

And so, I said we might get together for a cup of coffee and discuss it. The vulnerability everyone on those tapes willingly demonstrates, is an unstated social contract that only a viper would violate. *Give me a chance*.

I think I dated eleven women in all. K. and I spent several evenings together and we talked. It never went any deeper physically, though I rather thought K. wanted a more permanent relationship. We talk occasionally, and I feel she is a friend. If Great Expectations provides nothing greater, friendship is no measly treasure. G. and I had a berserk weekend that ended badly. Tantrums, name-calling, hysterical scenes straight out of a bad novel. I don't see her any longer. She has problems that don't mesh with my problems *at all*. She's pure poison for me, and I for her. I understand she has gotten into a strong relationship now, and I wish her well. But stay away from my door,

lady.

D. and I still date once in a while. We were compatible, and knowing her has been a delight. But I was right that she needed someone less volatile. She has two young children, she has an understandable and laudable need for order in her life and, as Steve Martin says, "I'm just sort of a rambling kind of guy." But what a terrific lady!

Of the other eight, I'll only anecdote briefly.

You ask why, after the length of this historical treatise, I don't give you all the bloody and scungy details, particularly about G.? Because I find, as I come down to the crunch point, that I cannot belittle the associations I've had with these women. They were pure in their search for the Holy Grail; I was writing an article. Only a viper violates the contract, and I'm smiling softly now as I discover I'm not as ruthless as I told D. I was.

Of the other eight, my luck was no better or worse than that which would have obtained had I met these women at a party or had I been fixed up by my Aunt Sophie. One was a righteous flake who (like guys I've heard about from some of my women friends) professed undying love for me on the first date and showed up the next day with her suitcases. One was so defensive over the phone, so ready to pick a fight with me, that I backed off, saying, "Lady, you're too mean even for *me*!" One wanted a daddy. I ain't nobody's daddy. One was in her early twenties and, though I made the error of once marrying a teenaged muffin, I have tasted the fire and no longer wish to smell the smell of burning psyche, especially my own. One was smarter than I and stopped seeing me. One was dumber than your faithful correspondent and I stopped seeing her. Also, she was a McDonald's freak and if I hadn't had a vasectomy some years ago and if we'd had children, all those toadburgers would have produced brain damaged children, I'm sure of it. One was this. One was that. I was a lot of other things.

And that's my story.

Let me clean up a few last points.

The price structure of Great Expectations is somewhat fluid. The reason for that is simply that Jeff and his mother Estelle are dealing with *people*, and sometimes there are accommodations that have to be made.

Membership is two hundred dollars a year. For that sum, and for twelve months, a member has unlimited access to the tapes. Reel out as few or as many as one needs.

For the first three months you get five active choices a months. That is, you can request dates with fifteen different people. You can accept as many dates as you get requests in the passive mode. After the first three months, to stay in the active mode, you must renew for twenty-five dollars a month. Jeff Ullman says the average number of renewals is between one and two. Actually, there isn't anything between one and two, but...Particularly for women under the age of thirty-five, experience shows hardly any renewals at all.

He also says he'll discourage too many renewals, because it means the service simply isn't right for *that* person.

And just stop to consider: where else can you have access to so many *potential* companions without spending every waking hour hustling and having to go out on dates that may turn out to be nightmares, considering how little data we have when we accept a date with a stranger? And if you can't find someone suitable out of fifteen-plus possibilities in just a ninety day period, then you'd better start checking out your face turned toward the world.

Great Expectations is now an authorized franchise dealer. They've spent over nine thousand dollars getting themselves checked out by the authorities, to establish themselves as a responsible service. A "relationship store" has been opened in Newport Beach by Kersh Walters and Susan Iannitti; another will soon open in San Diego. Such services, in less sophisticated form, already exist in New York and Washington D.C.

And despite media vultures like John Ettinger, whose will was so weak that he dated extensively in "gathering background" for his Channel 7 documentary (remember, I said I'd tell you about Mr. Ettinger?) and had positive experiences, nothing but positive experiences, but still had to seek out one disgruntled little lady who would whip out some bad vibes for the minicam...I see operations like Great Expectations as a breakthrough in human relations.

Mr. Ettinger understood that a rave notice like this article would not be nearly as titillating as a report that included a shadowy undercurrent of duplicity and weirdness. So he found a young woman who had been offered a cut rate membership—apparently because she couldn't afford the going price structure—and don't forget this is a business, not a charity—and she revealed herself on the TV screen by saying she had saved the two hundred dollars and found herself a guy on her own, and used the two hundred bucks to buy new drapes, so for the money she found a man *and* decorated the apartment. Well, that's nice, too.

Great Expectations will not be right for everyone.

It takes some courage to sit there and say *Give me a chance*.

Maybe some day again, I'll have the courage to say it.

NOTES

YOU DON'T KNOW ME, I DON'T KNOW YOU. Harlan has even more to say about Leiber, and he says it in "Fritz Leiber: A Few Too Few Words" elsewhere in this collection.

EPIPHANY. Even the casual reader may notice that Harlan draws on this quote by Beaumont twice in these essays on television (see "Down the Rabbit-Hole to TV-Land"). A writer is often asked who has influenced him, and it is obvious from their inclusion in two essays written fifteen years apart that these casual words by Beaumont have had a lasting effect on Harlan's thinking.

EPIPHANY. "Darkroom" was cancelled after airing only seven episodes, so the "Killing Bernstein" script was never produced. Harlan says now that he deliberately dawdled when it seemed that the series might die, so that he would never have to see his script butchered. He no longer has to worry that ABC might resurrect it, since the rights have reverted to him on turnaround.

DEFEATING THE GREEN SLIME. The North American Science Fiction Convention, which is held in those years in which the convention rotation system takes the WorldCon overseas.

HOW YOU STUPIDLY BLEW. See the previous article, "Defeating the Green Slime."

HOW YOU STUPIDLY BLEW. The *SFWA Forum* is a privately-circulated publication available to SFWA members only, in which, according to Harlan, intramural warfare is waged.

HOW YOU STUPIDLY BLEW. The only item in the drama category that legitimately garnered enough actual members' votes to win a place on the 1976 Nebula finalists ballot was *HARLAN!: Ellison Reads Ellison* (Alternate World Recordings AWR 6922). Fearing embarrassment either to Science Fiction Writers of America, or to Ellison, several of the officers of the organization arbitrarily added the films *Logan's Run* and *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. Their reasoning was that because the membership was so disinterested in the category, the Ellison album would appear on the ballot challenged only by "No Award." But even with the addition of the films, SFWA's voters opted for "No Award" in the 1976 Dramatic Presentation category. Ellison's prediction that neither the sound recording nor the films would win the Nebula was hardly a self-fulfilling prophecy; it was based on simple observation of SFWA and its voting patterns on the Nebulas over many years. But not even Ellison could have foreseen what

happened at the Nebula Awards banquet on the evening of the day he delivered this impassioned lecture. Word having been passed to SFWA President Andrew J. Offutt, and to Nebula banquet coordinator Thomas Purdom, of the content of Ellison's presentation that afternoon, they assumed the moment of "No Award" winning in the Dramatic Presentation category would provide a setting in which Ellison might well cause an embarrassing scene. So they did not even announce the nominees in the category, as had been policy every year before. Ellison had no intention of making a scene; he had said what he wanted to say, and had taken all the action he intended to take, that afternoon. Nonetheless, those present at both Ellison's lecture, and the Awards presentation, recognized that he had been gifted with yet another indignity by the timorous governing body of SFWA.

HOW YOU STUPIDLY BLEW. This *bon mot* is expanded into an essay which Harlan wrote the next year, and which appears elsewhere in this collection as—you guessed it—"Face-Down in Gloria Swanson's Swimming Pool."

HOW YOU STUPIDLY BLEW. Harlan's position on Hollywood's insatiable hunger for SF product can be considered not only justified, but conservative, in light of the volume of SF films released since this statement.

HOW YOU STUPIDLY BLEW. In October of 1977, Michael Moorcock also resigned from SFWA, considerably more politely than Harlan, but indicating in his resignation letter that much the same feeling as that expressed by Harlan prompted his leavetaking.

VOE DOE DEE OH DOE. The photo described was taken on a day spent with McQueen which Harlan chronicles in "Centerpunching" elsewhere in this collection.

VOE DOE DEE OH DOE. Isaac Asimov and his wife, Janet O. Jeppson.

ROBERT SILVERBERG: AN APPRECIATION. If the meaning of this obscure word eludes you as it did me, Harlan offers that it is to be found on page 1043 of the *Oxford Universal Dictionary*.

TRUE LOVE: GROPING FOR THE HOLY GRAIL. Harlan expands on this theme in "Revealed At Last! What Killed the Dinosaurs!" elsewhere in this collection.

TRUE LOVE: GROPING FOR THE HOLY GRAIL. Find out what he does with it in Harlan's short story, "Grail," which he actually wrote three years later. Available in *Stalking the Nightmare*, Phantasia Press, 1982.

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